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JUST AS I AM

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET,'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET.

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JUST AS I AM.



CHAPTER I.

A FOUNTAIN OF BITTER WATERS.

THE first thing Morton heard when he went home from Dawley's farm that December afternoon was that a favourable reply had been received from the Home Secretary. Humphrey Vargas's sentence had been commuted to penal servitude for life.

'I suppose the philanthropists and humanitarians will be satisfied now,' said Morton savagely, 'Sir Everard Courtenay especially.'

He was to dine at Fairview that evening. He found Dulcie and her father in the morning-room ;

Sir Everard in his favourite chair by the fire, his book-table and reading-lamp by his side ; Dulcie at the piano, playing one of Chopin's wailing waltzes, a strain as plaintive as the moaning of the wind through an Æolian harp.

She left off playing, and rose to greet her lover, while Sir Everard looked up from his book to give Morton a friendly nod.

'Was it a grand day's sport ?' Dulcie asked as they sat side by side on the sofa in front of the fire. 'You went off in dashing style. Had you a good run ?'

'I had no run at all,' answered Morton ; and then he gave a brief sketch of Lady Frances Grange's adventure.

'Poor thing,' cried Dulcie ; 'how dreadful ! She might have been killed, might she not ?'

'Yes, if her horse had rolled over her when he fell back into the water it might have been fatal. She was in great danger, no doubt.'

'Was she frightened ?'

'Not in the least. She doesn't know what fear means. But she was stunned by the blow

against the tree, and was quite insensible when I dragged her off her horse.'

'How good of you to take care of her!'

'Good of me! Why, you would not have had me leave her to a groom, and go after the hounds?'

'I suppose that is what an enthusiastic sportsman would have done,' said Dulcie laughingly.

'You forget that Morton and Lady Frances are friends of long standing,' said Sir Everard. 'He would hardly desert an old friend under such circumstances. I dare say he found attendance upon the lady more agreeable than a run with the hounds.'

There was a sneer faintly perceptible in the baronet's tone. Dulcie looked from her father to her lover wonderingly, but said not a word.

'I congratulate you on the success of your memorial, Sir Everard,' said Morton.

'You must not call it my memorial. It was as much Sir Nathaniel's as mine, and I understand that even your aunt signed it.'

'But Sir Nathaniel told me it was you who originated the petition. It was you who took that man's position to heart.'

‘Perhaps I knew better than any one what a beaten-down whelp the creature was, and how poor a revenge it would be to hang him. I don’t believe his death could have been any satisfaction to you, Morton.’

‘It would be no satisfaction to me to hang the wrong man,’ said Morton, ‘if that’s what you mean. But it would be an ineffable satisfaction to me to see the right man swing for his crime. I take it that if you hadn’t felt serious doubts as to this man’s guilt you would not have been so eager to beg him off.’

‘That was a question for the jury, and they decided it against him. My only feeling in the matter was that he is a miserable wretch, who scarcely knows the difference between right and wrong, and that his remnant of life might just as well be spared.’

‘If you extend your mercy to that class of criminals, you will have occasion to memorialize the Home Secretary every week, for the hangman’s chief duty is with that kind of sinner.’

‘This man’s case came within my ken, and

appealed to me in a peculiar manner. I hope, Morton, you will have the good sense to let this subject drop, and that you will not call upon me to justify myself any farther.'

This was the nearest approach to a coolness of feeling that there had ever been between Sir Everard and his future son-in-law since Morton had first been received at Fairview as Dulcie's accepted suitor.

A look of distress clouded the fair girlish face as Dulcie turned appealingly to her father.

'Don't be offended with Morton, dear papa,' she said gently. 'You know that this is a subject upon which he feels deeply.'

'No doubt. But I think we have had something too much of it. There are some subjects that will not bear to be talked about.'

Here Scroope announced dinner, and closed the conversation. Sir Everard gave his arm to his daughter, and Morton followed to the snug little dining-room, where the round table was bright with flowers and ferns, and quaint Venetian glass, and artistic old silver.

At table the conversation became frivolous, in

deference to Scroope and his underling. Sir Everard was for the most part silent, leaving the young people to talk of the things they cared about—the church—the choir—the last penny reading at the school-house—the New Year ball at Highclere—the At Home early in January, for which Mrs. Aspinall had issued cards, with the agreeable announcement, ‘Dancing,’ in the left-hand corner.

‘I suppose Lady Frances will go to the ball at Highclere,’ speculated Dulcie.

‘I haven’t asked her if she is going, but I should think it likely. She is passionately fond of dancing. Why don’t you go, Dulcie? I would get tickets for Tiny and Horatia, and my aunt could chaperon you all.’

‘Papa does not approve of public balls,’ said Dulcie, with a deprecating glance at her father.

‘I approve of them immensely in the abstract, as a pleasant impetus to the trade of a quiet little county town, but I don’t want to see my daughter spinning round a public assembly-room in the arms of any counterjumper whom the master of the ceremonies may introduce to her.’

‘Oh, papa, there is a formidable list of patron-

esses; tickets only by voucher. There's no possibility of a counterjumper at the Highclere ball.'

'Then there may be something worse than counterjumpers—raffish hunting men, perhaps, who come from heaven knows where, and get their living heaven knows how. Any man who comes to Avonmore with three horses and a servant takes brevet rank as gentleman.'

'Very well,' said Morton. 'We will none of us go to the ball. I suppose you have accepted for Mrs. Aspinall's At Home?'

'Yes, papa has no objection to that.'

Dinner was over. Dulcie trifled with a cluster of grapes for five minutes, and then rose to leave the two gentlemen to their claret and conversation. Morton opened the door for her, and gently pressed the little hand that was nearest him as she passed into the hall. Then he went back to the hearth and seated himself opposite Sir Everard, who had wheeled his chair round to the fire. It was a blustrous night, the wind raving and whistling in the tops of the tall poplars, and making the long branches of the cedars creak and groan. A new moon rose high

among black, ragged clouds, showing her pale face fitfully through a rent in the darkness.

For some minutes the two men sat by the fire in silence, listening to the wind howling in the wide old chimney, where it seemed to rage more furiously than out of doors. Sir Everard was thoughtful, after his wont; he gazed dreamily at the burning logs, as if in the caverns and gulfs and rugged peaks and promontories of that picturesque fire he could read the story of the past. That settled sadness which had been a part of his character ever since his wife's untimely death hung over him to-night like a cloud.

He looked up suddenly, and saw Morton watching him with grave, intent eyes.

'Why don't you fill your glass, Morton? That La Rose in the jug beside you is too good a wine to be treated so contemptuously.'

'May I give you some first?'

'Do. I feel shivery and out of sorts to-night. The moaning of a wind like that is the most melancholy sound in nature.'

Morton filled the thin, bell-shaped glass before the baronet, but he took no wine himself.

‘You said just now, Sir Everard,’ he began gravely, ‘that there had been something too much said by me about the trial of that man yonder. Yet I think if you consider the matter you will see that an only son — losing a beloved father by a most foul crime when he was just old enough to know and love him and carry his image in his mind to the end of life — could hardly be expected to be temperate in his feelings towards that father’s murderer. The lapse of years, which to the outside world may seem to lessen the wickedness of the crime, could have no influence upon the son who in all those years had waited and hoped for the day of retribution. Thus you will perceive on reflection that it is hardly strange I should feel somewhat disappointed at this man’s escape, always supposing his story to be true.’

‘I am quite able to understand your feeling,’ said Sir Everard, ‘but I think I should be doing you no kindness were I to encourage a morbid disposition to dwell upon the past. My own life has been so darkened by grief that I would do

much to save a young man, in whose welfare I am interested, from the weak indulgence of a vain regret. If you are to be Dulcie's husband you must make her life bright and happy, and to do that you must look forward, and not backward.'

'I hope to be able to do that. I hope to get this cloud out of my brain,' said Morton. 'Sir Everard, may I be frank with you?'

'The franker the better.'

'For the last week—perhaps I had better say ever since the trial—my mind has been distracted by torturing doubts. I have fought in vain against the diabolical suggestions that have forced themselves upon me. And now—now I sit opposite you here—your friend and guest, your future son-in-law, bound by every tie to honour and revere you—the truth must out. My misery of the last fortnight has been caused by the idea that you, once my father's bosom friend, know more of the circumstances of his death than you care to reveal—that you are hiding something from me, that you had some private reason for saving that man's life, that you——'

A passionate burst of sobs stopped his utterance. He turned his back upon Sir Everard and buried his face in the cushion of his chair.

There was silence for some moments, while Morton sat with his face hidden, his whole frame shaken by the violence of his emotion. Sir Everard waited for the storm to pass.

‘Morton, I am inexpressibly grieved and distressed at this,’ he began calmly, in tones of friendly admonition. ‘You have brooded upon this dreadful theme until your mind has lost its balance, and you see all things in a false light. What could I know of your father’s murder which all the world that ever heard of that murder does not know? What motive could I have for hiding any knowledge of that kind? I, his friend! What secret alliance can you conceive between me and yonder vagabond? The whole fancy is midsummer madness. I am too sorry for you to be angry; but I warn you that I will marry my daughter to no man who is the victim of a monomania. If you cannot shut this folly out of your mind at once and for ever you are no husband for Dulcie.’

‘Dulcie, my darling,’ murmured Morton, with his face still hidden in his clasped hands, ‘what would I not sacrifice for your sake!’

‘She asks no sacrifice from you, nor I for her,’ retorted Sir Everard proudly. ‘But the man to whom I give her must be sound in heart and mind.’

‘Sir Everard, you have been forbearing with me so far,’ said Morton, lifting his head, and turning his pale, agitated face towards the baronet. ‘Perhaps you will bear with me a little further, and then this painful question may be at rest between us for ever. I have asked questions of others—my aunt and Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon—which I feel it would have been more manly to have asked, in the first instance, of you. I have heard from many people that you and my father were bosom friends, at school, at college, in after life. Was that so?’

‘Yes, we were close friends. Yes, he was very dear to me.’

‘My aunt told me that at Cambridge you once saved his life, at the risk of your own, when

he was seized with cramp in a dangerous part of the river.'

'I would have done the same for any man in the same danger. I was a good swimmer—it was nothing. Do not speak of these things. They are painful to remember.'

'But I must speak of them. I want to understand. And after you left the University you were still friends?'

'Fast friends.'

'So every one tells me,' said Morton, rising and standing face to face with the baronet, who had risen from his chair, and was lounging with his back against the chimney-piece. 'And now, Sir Everard, as you are a gentleman and a man of stainless honour, answer me this question. Were you and my father friends to the hour of his death?'

Everard Courtenay faced him without flinching, the eyelids never quivered over the gray eyes, the firm, thin lips kept their inflexible line under the iron-gray moustache, the dark brows contracted ever so slightly with indignant pride, but that was all.

‘We never quarrelled,’ he answered coldly.

‘But your feelings towards him, your affection for him, your confidence in him? Were those unchanged to the last?’

The gray eyes flashed sudden fire; the face changed with a look of anger that was terrible, titanic almost—the rage of Jove himself, mighty to avenge and destroy.

‘Young man, your questions insult my honour, and outrage your father’s memory. His good name is the best answer to them. I will not have the past ripped up to satisfy your unreasonable curiosity. I will submit to no cross-examination. You insulted me just now by the expression of doubts so absurd that I could not bring myself to resent them. But now, when you bring your dead father’s honour into question, you go a step too far.’

‘Forgive me, Sir Everard. I am grieved beyond measure to offend you, but think how little it is I ask—only to be sure that your love for my father knew no change; that he was your friend to the hour of his death.’

‘And if I were to say yes, you would be

satisfied. But I deny your right to question me upon a matter of feeling. I have told you that there was never any quarrel between your father and me.'

'Yet I am told that on that last fatal day there was a coolness; your manner to each other was not what it had been.'

'Your informers would have been better sportsmen if they had given their attention to the business in hand instead of watching their neighbours,' answered Sir Everard. 'A fox hunt is hardly a time for the development of friendship. Do people suppose that Mr. Blake and I ought to have ridden shoulder to shoulder all day because we were friends? If I remember rightly, I was riding a fidgety little black mare, which had a rooted objection to poor Blake's big chestnut. That alone would have been a reason for my giving him a wide berth.'

Morton felt a touch of shame at this argument. It reduced Sir Nathaniel's suspicions to nothing, and was a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous. Perhaps all the rest of Morton's

suspensions were as baseless—could be answered as easily as this.

‘Will you forgive me, Sir Everard?’ he said, with a penitent look. ‘Will you try to forget all I have said to-night—for Dulcie’s sake?’

‘I will try—for Dulcie’s sake.’

‘I think I’ll go to the morning-room to join her.’

‘Do. I would rather be alone. You have awakened sad memories. You have let loose a fountain of bitter waters.’

‘Forgive me,’ said Morton again.

He went to rejoin Dulcie, who was sitting on a low chair, with a funny little work-table before her, and a huge workbasket at her side, making children’s frocks for her annual distribution of warm clothing, which was to take place together with all manner of pleasant little ceremonies—snapdragon, and a Christmas-tree for the children, and a copperful of elder wine for the grown-ups—on Christmas Eve. What happiness for Morton to sit beside the industrious little sempstress, to thread her needles with slow, clumsy

fingers, and hold her reels of cotton, fondly imagining he was helping and not hindering her!

Sir Everard left the dining-room directly after his guest, and went out through a lobby, where he stopped to put on his slouch hat and fur-lined coat, to the broad terrace in front of the house, where he paced up and down for an hour under the wild sky, watching the driving clouds and the sickly moon, and the black shadows of the cedar boughs drifting along the grass.

The wild night seemed to suit his humour. When he was tired of the terrace, he wandered about the grounds, across the lawn, round the shrubberied walks, down by the lake, where a swan came out of the darkness and the rushes to hiss at him, angry at the unaccustomed footfall.

Once, from the other side of the lake, in the wildest part of the grounds, he stopped to look back at the house, where the Tudor windows of Dulcie's room, with stained glass in the upper mullions, shone, like the famous windows in Aladdin's palace—as if they had been set with many-coloured gems.

‘My star, my delight,’ murmured Sir Everard.
‘So long as I have you I am happy. And now
my mind is made up. My dearest, I may grieve
you, but it shall not be for long. A father’s love
shall make amends for all you lose.’

CHAPTER II.

CHRISTMAS AT TANGLEY MANOR.

DULCIE'S work was all finished early on Christmas Eve, and everything was ready for the entertainment of her various pensioners, which was to be held in the big official room where Humphrey Vargas had made his confession. The room looked bright and cheery enough to-night, hung with holly and laurel, and furnished with two long tables spread with a sumptuous tea; while on a cross table at the end of the room were laid out the gifts of clothing and other comfortable things, which Dulcie had collected or provided for distribution; cosy cloaks and hoods for the small children, hats and jackets for the big girls; knitted wool waistcoats and comforters for the old men; gowns or petticoats for the old women; packets of tea; tobacco, in smart pouches, deftly made from odds and ends of Dulcie's silk gowns; here and there a bright cap-ribbon to

give colour to the mass of warm linsey and duffle, or a scarlet cloak to relieve the grays and browns of the petticoats ; taste and thoughtfulness perceptible in everything.

And here was Ducie, in her black velvet gown, flitting to and fro with cups of tea, and baskets of plum cake, talking to everybody, knowing everybody's name and everybody's domestic affairs, the ages of all the children, the ailments of all who had been ill, the prospects of all who were just going out to service, or beginning life in any way ; the griefs of all whose rusty black told of bereavement.

Morton and his two sisters and Lizzie Hardman were working with her. Miss Blake presided over the urn and teapots, and poured out tea and coffee till her arm ached. It was altogether the happiest, brightest party at which Morton had ever assisted. He forgot all his troubles in the rapture of seeing how Dulcie was beloved, how like a ministering angel she moved hither and thither among the old and young, giving comfort and pleasure to all. People had come from far and near to Dulcie's tea-party. There was no distinction as to parish.

All Dora Blake's protégés were invited, as well as Dulcie's own particular people.

There was only one cloud in Dulcie's sky, but that was so dark a shadow she hardly dared think about it, lest she should flag in her efforts to make others happy. Sir Everard had gone to London with his valet, on particular business ; and for the first time since Dulcie had been his housekeeper he was to spend Christmas away from home. This was a big trouble for the loving daughter, who had associated every happiness in life with her father's presence, and to whom life seemed almost a blank when he was absent. She had spoken only the unexaggerated truth when she said that her father would always be first in her mind. No new tie could lessen that which years had woven round her heart, the sacred bond which had grown with her growth, and strengthened with her strength.

'Christmas Day without papa will be too sad,' she told Miss Blake, when she was explaining how some unavoidable piece of business had obliged Sir Everard to go to London.

'My pet, you must spend your Christmas with

us,' said Aunt Dora; 'and it will be very odd if we can't make you happy. Tell your maid to pack your portmanteau, and come home with us this evening, after you've dismissed these good people.'

'I don't know if papa would like me to leave home in his absence,' faltered Dulcie.

'My dearest child, you know he allows you to come to Tangley as often as you like. I'll assume all the responsibility of this visit. You shall have the room opening out of mine, and you shall be my special guest, and the apple of my eye. If Sir Everard wants to scold anybody when he comes home, he shall scold me.'

'I don't think he'll do that,' answered Dulcie, smiling. 'He honours and loves you, and thinks that everything you do is right. So if you really don't mind having me, dear auntie, I should dearly like to come. Next to being with papa it will be happiness to be with you.'

'Then that's settled,' said Miss Blake.

The Christmas-tree was in the servants' hall, a glorious sight for old and young eyes, shining with the light of innumerable coloured tapers, and

hung with everything that the heart of man, woman, or child could desire—tobacco-boxes, dolls, nutmeg-graters, babies' socks, toys, cap-ribbons, sweetstuff, tea, coffee, in coloured paper packets, warm gloves, comforters, oranges, needle-books, rosy apples, silver thimbles, muffatees—a tree out of fairy-land. Everybody got something: and by some legerdemain of Dulcie's everybody seemed to get just the exact article which he or she most ardently desired.

Then they all hurry back to the Justice-room, whence the cups and saucers and long tables have vanished as if by magic, leaving a clear floor for the climax of the evening's enjoyment, Sir Roger de Coverley, danced by old and young, down to the little three-year-olds that can just toddle. A brace of fiddlers, and a young man who thinks he can play the cornet-à-piston, are established in a corner by the fireplace. Negus and hot elder wine, with freshly-filled baskets of plum-cake, are handed round to restore the vital forces which have been exhausted by the feverish excitement of the Christmas-tree. There is a pause of ten minutes or so for refreshments; and then the two fiddlers

strike an opening chord, the young man with the cornet gives a feeble blast in a wrong key, and, with a great stamping of feet and a good deal of hard breathing, the dance begins, Dulcie and Morton leading, Lizzie Hardman bringing up the rear with a waddling three-year-old in a Rob Roy frock and socks to correspond. Tiny and Horatia prefer to stand and look on, but Aunt Dora is dancing arduously, her partner a gigantic waggoner in a gorgeously-braided smock frock and brown leather leggings.

Sir Roger lasts about three quarters of an hour, and after more negus and elder wine the happy guests depart, but not till they have deafened everybody with three loud cheers in honour of Dulcie.

‘Give it mouth, boys,’ cries the huge waggoner, waving his mighty arm; ‘another and another, boys, and a little one in for Miss Blake and the other ladies.’

Then, with much scraping of feet and ducking of heads in the doorway, Dulcie’s Christmas visitors take their leave, and there is more noise

of merry voices and glad laughter in the village of Austhorpe as they go their homeward way than will be heard again on this side of harvest home.

Christmas Day at Tangley was not altogether sad for Dulcie, even though, as she told Aunt Dora with her eyes full of tears, it was the first Christmas Day she had spent away from her father since she was eight years old. Everybody conspired to make her forget this woful fact. She drove with Morton and the girls to the old parish church at Highclere, for morning service, and the solemn cathedral chants, the fine old organ, thrilled and delighted her. The service seemed as splendid to Dulcie as all the glories of Westminster Abbey would appear to a more experienced church-goer: so striking was the contrast to the village choir and feeble harmonium at Austhorpe. After morning church they drove through the wintry woods, lightly powdered with rime, to Blatchmardean Castle, to see if Lady Frances Grange were any the worse for her ducking in Twamley brook, and the Earl insisted that they should stay to luncheon.

‘Provided you can all eat cold mutton,’ he said cheerily. ‘I know there was a haunch for dinner last night, and I dare say it will appear at luncheon. It was off one of my finest ewes, and I think a slice of cold roast mutton with a little hot pickle is not half a bad thing.’

There were curry, and a chicken pie, as well as the cold haunch, and the luncheon party was altogether as pleasant and cheerful as it could be—with all the charm of an unpremeditated entertainment. Everybody talked of his or her favourite subject. Lord Blatchmardean had a great deal to tell Morton about his latest experiments in feeding sheep—the wonderful success of which was to be perceived in the flavour of the cold haunch. Frances told Tiny her mortifying experiences of the other day, and expatiated on Morton’s goodness in sacrificing his own sport for her comfort. Lord Beville sat next Dulcie, and had a great deal to say to her—as he always had when they met, seeming intensely interested in everything which interested her—even to the most feminine trivialities.

‘Why don’t you drive over to see my sister

sometimes?' he asked. 'You say you would like to play billiards as well as she does. There's our table at your service; and Fan or I would only be too delighted to give you a lesson. She's one of the best players in Daleshire, don't you know?'

'So Morton has told me,' said Dulcie, smiling at his fervid good-nature. 'It's very kind of you to make such an offer, but I really don't know that I have any ambition about billiards. I have felt rather humiliated sometimes when people have asked me to join in a game, and I have been obliged to confess that I hardly know how to handle a cue. But I don't think I should ever be able to devote much time to billiards. We have no table at home; and I can't bear to be often away from my father.'

'And yet you will leave him altogether before long,' said Beville, looking more serious than the nature of the conversation might seem to warrant. 'Is not that rather inconsistent?'

'I suppose it is,' faltered Dulcie; 'but even when I am married I hope to spend at least half my life with my father. Tangley is not far from Fairview. I shall still be able to take care of papa, and he

will be with us at the Manor House a great deal, I hope.'

'Sir Everard and Morton get on very well together, I suppose,' speculated Beville.

'Morton is devoted to my father.'

'And your father likes him?'

'Oh yes, as much as I think papa would ever like any young man. You see, my dearest father has lived a lonely life since he lost my mother. He has lived with his books, not caring much for society, not interesting himself in politics, or in the outside world. Now Morton is all energy and activity of mind, deeply interested in the questions of the day.'

'I understand — a man of action, while your father is a man of thought. No; there cannot be much sympathy between them,' said Lord Beville decidedly, as if he were glad to have the question settled. 'Morton is going into Parliament, I hear.'

'I hope so.'

'Then you will have to spend nearly half of every year in London, and that will separate you and Sir Everard.'

‘I hope papa may go to London with us. Why do you try to make me unhappy, Lord Beville?’

‘Could I be so diabolical as to do that? I think not. But you remember the story of the fox who had lost his tail?’

‘Yes, he wanted all the other foxes to cut off their tails!’

‘Precisely. That is human nature as well as vulpine nature. Suppose now that I were very unhappy myself?’

‘I should be sorry to suppose that,’ answered Dulcie, smiling at him as if the suggestion were a joke; ‘but even if you were, I don’t think you would be so unkind as to wish to make me unhappy too.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that. You don’t know what evil moods I am subject to sometimes.’

Morton had got himself released from Lord Blatchmardean and the agricultural question by this time, and, luncheon being ended, he was able to come round to Dulcie’s side of the table, having wondered very much what Beville and his betrothed had been talking about so seriously. But before he could say a word to Dulcie Lady Frances carried

her off to the stables to feed the horses with the fragments of the feast, in the shape of bread and apples.

‘That’s the way all my ribstones and russets go,’ remonstrated the Earl, who was almost as proud of his apples as of his sheep.

Clementine asked Lady Frances and her brother to drive over to Tangley in the evening with Miss Moulton, to join in some Christmas games, provided the Earl would not mind being left alone on the festive occasion; to which Lord Blatchmardean replied cheerily that he was never less alone than when alone, adding, rather inconsistently, that he would have his steward in to talk over the latest farming operations.

‘That fellow MacTaggart is always up to his eyes in work,’ he said. ‘He quite snubs me if I stop him in the fields of a morning to ask him how things are going on; but I dare say over a glass of toddy he will be more communicative.’

So the young people being free to accept Clementine’s invitation it was settled they were to drive over early in the evening. The Tangley

dinner was to be at five o'clock, to give the servants a long evening for snap-dragon and mistletoe; whereby Aunt Dora and the young people were ready for their guests at seven, and all the jardinières and coffee-tables were wheeled away from the centre of the floor, leaving room and verge enough for such juvenile sports as Tiny and Lizzie Hardman delighted in, and the grave Horatia blandly tolerated.

Beville and Frances were tremendously strong at these festal games, suggesting many new ideas, starting dumb charades, and speaking charades, comic tableaux vivants, a goose game, and a dancing-bear game, and a huntsman's game, and a sneezing game, and all manner of ridiculous diversions, in which Miss Moulton and Aunt Dora assisted with exemplary good-humour. Then on the edge of midnight Tiny asked Lizzie Hardman to play a waltz, a request with which that young person immediately complied, playing the Blue Danube with such swing and perfect accent that before they had time to think about it Dulcie and Beville were floating along a stream of melody, in dream-like

revolutions, smooth as leaves gliding down a swift-running river. Morton stood looking on for a minute or so, admiring the pose of Dulcie's slender figure, the grace of the bright girlish head. He might have stood and gazed thus till the dance had ended perhaps had it not been for Lady Frances.

'Well,' she said, looking at him with a smile of bewitching impertinence, 'has that melody no inspiration for you?'

'It inspires me to solicit the privilege of a waltz with you,' answered Morton promptly, and in the next minute they were revolving with the other pair.

Frances Grange was an exquisite waltzer. It was one of her rare accomplishments—it was a natural gift. She had won the enthusiastic praises of the famous Madame Adelaide, whose pupil she had been for one brief course of lessons when she was in London for her first season, under Lady Luffington's wing.

'That girl is a born dancer,' cried Madame Adelaide. 'You others crawl about like beetles, spiders, all that there is of the most ignoble. This

one can dance—it is the poetry of motion. Go then, little cat, you want none of my lessons. You dance like daffodils, or running waters. It is the good God who has taught thee.’

To waltz with Frances was to forget for the moment that there was any other girl in existence, or that life held any higher delight than circling dreamily to a drawling German melody.

‘Are you tired?’ asked Morton, when they had out-waltzed the other two for about five minutes.

‘I don’t know what it means to be tired of waltzing: but perhaps Miss Hardman is tired of playing.’

They were near enough to the piano for Lizzie to hear the suggestion.

‘Not in the least,’ she said, changing to the Manola, with its languid sweetness, and groundswell of passion.

Lord Beville started again, this time with Clementine, while Dulcie seated herself by the piano, where she could talk to Lizzie Hardman.

Lizzie’s honest gray eyes were following those two dancers in whom she was most interested.

Morton and Lady Frances. She and Morton had danced many a waltz together on summer evenings, when all the windows were open to the cool, sweet night, and the vesper carol of thrush or black-bird mingled with the music of the waltz. But these had been evenings when there was no one else for Morton to dance with except his sisters; and he had a theory that neither Tiny's nor Horatia's step corresponded with his. To-night Lizzie was out of it all: and it seemed to her, as she sat at the piano, that her mission in life was to pipe to other people's dancing.

Lord Beville and Clementine began to flag presently, and they both dropped into seats near Dulcie, in the snug corner behind the piano.

'How well Morton and Fan step together!' said Beville, speaking of the dancers as if they were horses, 'but that's only natural. Fan broke him in.'

Dulcie looked puzzled.

'She taught him to waltz—it was about the only accomplishment she could teach him. They used to practise in the great saloon at Blatch-

mardean, to the terror of all the rats and mice behind the panelling.'

'Your sister waltzes exquisitely,' said Dulcie, looking on with a faint thrill of jealousy as Morton and Frances floated down the room, circling perpetually, like phantom dancers in a German legend.

'Good mover! Picks up her feet nicely, doesn't she?' said Beville, with his horsey air.

Lizzie struck a sudden crashing chord, and the waltzers stopped in a startled way, like mechanical figures whose machinery had gone wrong.

'I thought you were going on for ever, Morton,' she said.

'I beg your pardon, Lizzie, upon my word it was too bad,' answered Morton, 'but I could not allow Lady Frances to crow over me, though she was my instructor in the art of waltzing.'

'You never told me that before,' said Dulcie presently, when she and Morton had strayed into a conservatory all abloom with snowdrops and Parma violets, Christmas roses, and lilies of the valley.

‘Never told you what, dearest?’

‘That Lady Frances taught you to waltz.’

‘What a terrible omission!’ he exclaimed, smiling down at her, as she stood trifling with the long leaves of a cluster of lilies of the valley. ‘Why, dear child, Fanny Grange and I have been like brother and sister for the last ten years. She taught me to waltz; and I’m afraid she taught me to ride, for I know I was a tremendous muff in the hunting-field till she took me under her wing.’

‘I wonder——’ faltered Dulcie.

‘What do you wonder, my loveliest?’

‘Why you did not fall in love with Lady Frances instead of with me.’

‘That’s a curious question, and I can only give you the answer Tom Jones gave his mistress.’

‘What was that?’

‘Look in the glass, Dulcie, and you will see why I love you better than any one else in the world; why I never can be inconstant to you.’

‘Only for that, Morton! only for some fancied prettiness you can see in me more than in other

people! That is such a poor reason. Disease or affliction might change me to-morrow.'

'But the change would not alter my love, Dulcie. It was born of your beauty, but it has grown up in my heart now, and is a part of my nature. Nothing can lessen it.'

'I like to believe you,' answered Dulcie softly, looking up at him with innocent blue eyes, beaming purest love.

CHAPTER III.

‘TO THE END OF THE WORLD.’

DULCIE went back to Fairview directly after an early breakfast next day. Her father had promised to return to-day, and no argument could prevail upon her to linger for another hour at Tangley, albeit Morton and his sisters represented to her that Sir Everard could not possibly be at home till the afternoon.

‘I am not sure of that,’ said Dulcie; ‘he may have travelled by a night train.’

‘He would hardly do that unless there were some urgency in the case,’ argued Aunt Dora.

‘Isn’t it urgent for him to come back to *me*?’ cried Dulcie indignantly. ‘Does he not know that I am miserable without him? Oh, dear auntie, I beg ten thousand pardons,’ she exclaimed, conscious of having been rude to her hostess, ‘you know how happy you have made me here; but I could not

exist much longer without my father. Nothing could fill that blank.'

Morton looked grave.

'If this girl were called upon to choose between her father and me I know which of us would go by the board,' he said to himself.

Dulcie's pony carriage was at the door at nine o'clock. She had given particular orders about it when she left home on Christmas Eve. She was ready dressed in her fur jacket and hat. Her portmanteau had been brought down. There was a great deal of kissing to be gone through with Aunt Dora and the three girls, Lizzie Hardman coming in for an honest share of the kisses, though she was only a penniless dependant; and then Dulcie pulled on her fur driving gloves and ran off to the carriage.

'I suppose I may be permitted to drive home with you,' said Morton, taking the seat by her side; and away went the ponies, at a sharp trot, along the frost-bound road.

Morton was dismissed at the door of Fairview, after a delightful twenty minutes' drive through the crisp wintry air.

'Mayn't I come in and play a game of chess with you?' he asked, lingering on the threshold.

'Chess at half-past nine in the morning!' exclaimed Dulcie. 'Ridiculous! I am going to be desperately busy.'

'Don't you know that this is Boxing Day, and a general holiday?'

'Yes, for poor people who work hard all the year round, and who want an appointed day now and then to get tipsy upon. I have a hundred things to do. Besides, papa may come home at any moment, and he may be tired, or he may want to be alone.'

'I see,' said Morton, rather moodily. 'I count for nothing when your father is in question. Well, I suppose I may come in the evening?'

'Yes, dear. Papa will have rested by that time, and will be charmed to see you.'

'I don't know much about that; but if you are charmed, that is enough for me.'

So they kissed and parted, and Dulcie ran off to her household duties, which were light but numerous.

She ransacked all the greenhouses and adorned

the rooms in which her father lived with freshest ferns and flowers, gay smiling blossoms which should seem to welcome him home. She was very exact in her orders about the dinner, and had a consultation with Scroope as to which particular hock and claret should be brought up from the cellar for this evening's consumption.

'Your master will be tired after his journey,' she said. 'He must have something especially good.'

When all these duties had been performed there was still a great deal of the day to be got rid of, and the hours seemed all the longer because of that eager expectation of her father's momentary return, which kept Dulcie on the alert for every sound of wheels on the road outside Fairview. Sometimes she seated herself at the piano with the intention of practising for a couple of hours at a stretch ; but in the middle of a dreamy nocturne her thoughts wandered off, her hands dropped listlessly from the keys, and she went to the window to look across the rise and fall of lawn and shrubberies to one distant point at which, through a break in the trees, she could see any vehicle passing along the road.

'I wonder why papa went to town so suddenly,' she thought, over and over again; 'and why he did not tell me what his business was about.'

So the day wore heavily on, and then came twilight, and the quaint little tea-table was set out in front of the fire; and then, just as Dulcie was growing tearful at the thought that this pleasantest hour of all the winter day was going to slip past without bringing her father, the welcome sound of wheels was heard in the avenue, and she ran out bareheaded to greet the traveller.

The coachman pulled up his horse at sight of the fair head, with wind-tossed hair, and Sir Everard got out of the brougham within fifty yards of the house. Dulcie slipped her arm through his, and walked by his side to the hall.

Even in that dim light she could see that he looked haggard and worn.

'Dear father, how tired you must be!' she murmured in soothing tones.

'Yes, I am a little tired, and I have been a good deal worried.'

‘Come to your nest by the fire, dearest, and let me give you some tea.’

‘A woman’s panacea. If it would only cure all our ills!’ said Sir Everard. ‘If it were like the water of Lethe, now, Dulcie, and could give us everlasting forgetfulness!’

They were in the morning-room by this time, in the cheerful glow of the fire, Dulcie helping her father to take off his fur-lined coat.

‘Dear father,’ she exclaimed, ‘you would not like to forget everything?’

‘Everything, Dulcie, just for the sake of forgetting one thing,’ answered Sir Everard wearily. ‘But no,’ he went on in a lighter tone, ‘I should not like to forget my sweet young daughter, and all her goodness to me.’

‘Goodness?’ questioned Dulcie; ‘you mean gratitude, papa. And now tell me all about this London business. Was it very tiresome?’

‘It was worse than tiresome, Dulcie,’ he answered gravely, ‘for I fear that it will grieve you. But we’ll talk about it presently. Give me my cup of tea, and tell me how you amused yourself while I was away.’

Dulcie hereupon busied herself about her teapot, while she gave her father a brief sketch of what had happened during his absence.

'I had no idea Morton and Lady Frances Grange were such friends,' she said, when she had told him about the impromptu dance.

'Nor I, till the other day,' answered Sir Everard.

'Don't you think her very pretty?' asked Dulcie thoughtfully.

'I should call her distinguished-looking, rather than pretty. There is an originality about her, a fascinating audacity. I can quite understand any young man falling in love with her. Indeed, I wonder she has not made a good match before now.'

'It is strange, is it not, papa?' said Dulcie, with an unconscious sigh. 'Perhaps there is some one whom she likes very much, but who does not care for her?'

'Perhaps. A question of that kind offers an illimitable field for speculation.'

'And now, dear father, about this London business? Why should it grieve me? I don't think it can, so long as it has nothing to do with you.'

‘ My dearest, unfortunately this has to do with me.’

Dulcie looked at him earnestly, her delicate bloom paling a little.

‘ It is the loss of money, then,’ she said. ‘ You have had some misfortune. We are going to be poor. Oh, dearest father, that won’t grieve me, so long as I can make you happy, so long as I can comfort you.’

‘ No, Dulcie, it is no money loss which troubles me. I think both you and I could bear that. The Fates do not touch us there.’

‘ What is it then, papa ?’

She was on her knees beside his chair, her loving hands clasping his, the firelight shining on her pale, eager face, her tender blue eyes, and parted lips.

‘ Darling, I think you know that for a longish time, though I have made light of it always, I have not been very strong or altogether in good health.’

The pale cheeks grew deathly white, the light died out of the widening gaze.

‘ Father ! father !’ she cried, with a choking sob.

‘ For a long time—certainly for the last three

years—I have felt that my prime of life was over. I have lost all pleasure in active exercise, and anything in the shape of exertion has become a fatigue to me. For a long time—for more than three years—it has been in my mind that there was something organically wrong, and that I ought to consult some authority in the particular kind of disorder with which I believed myself affected.'

'Yes,' said Dulcie breathlessly, her eyes fixed on her father's face.

'The other day I had an attack of my old chronic pain in the side. It was a little sharper than usual, and it told me the time had come when I must face the inevitable. If this thing was to be fatal, it was best I should know it.'

'Father!'

It was a cry of despair which came from her in spite of herself—a wild appeal to him with outstretched hands and shrinking figure—warding off the horror he was going to tell: as if it had been some dreadful engine that was slowly bearing down upon her to crush her to death, and she saw the doom, and could not escape it.

‘My dearest, this thing must come to us all in our time, in some form or other. The same dark night awaits all. We must all tread the same path. At its worst it means death, and—my darling, don’t look at me with those agonized eyes—for me the doom may approach slowly, gently. We may have years to spend together yet.’

‘Father, will you tell me the truth quite plainly? You saw a doctor in London?’

‘Yes, one of the greatest men in that big city.’

‘And he told you that you have a fatal disease?’

‘He only confirmed my own suspicion. Heart and lungs are both affected, and have been for a long time. My life cannot be a long one; but the thread may be spun a little longer yet, in spite of the Fates, if I am careful.’

‘We will be careful,’ cried Dulcie; ‘we will be so careful that a few months hence when you go to the physician he will tell you there is nothing the matter—your daughter’s care has cured you. What are we to do, dear father? tell me everything.’

‘I fear you will hardly care to assist in my cure,

Dulcie, when you know the conditions attaching to it.'

'What are they?'

'First and foremost, I am never again to spend a winter in England, unless I am resigned to spend the latter half of it in my grave. Dr. Randal recommends me to start at once for the south of France, possibly to cross to Algiers.'

'Yes, papa. When are we to go? To-morrow?'

'Think, Dulcie! It is a long way from Morton. Will you go with me?'

'To the end of the world,' she answered, hiding her tears upon his breast.

CHAPTER IV.

IN MR. TOMPLIN'S CHAMBERS.

BOXING DAY was over, and the industrious classes were straggling back to the work-a-day world with its dull round of labour, feeling slightly the worse in health and spirits, and considerably the worse in pocket, for the Christmas holidays. London, with its surrounding belt of dingy suburbs, wore its dullest aspect as Jane Barnard, seated in a corner of a third-class carriage, surveyed this almost unknown world with curious eyes which let nothing escape them.

'I don't see much to boast of in the old country,' she said to herself, as she looked across a shabby wilderness of roofs and chimneys, broken here and there by some tall shaft which vomited clouds of black smoke that made a darkness in the air. The narrow streets; the straggling neighbourhoods badly begun, and never to be finished; the dirty window-curtains in smoky windows; the littered pens at the

back of the houses, which had been intended for gardens; all these seemed to the eye of Jane Barnard unspeakably hideous. The rural beauty of Daleshire had appeared small and mean in contrast with the broad rivers and mighty hills of her adopted country; but these London outskirts were uglier than anything she had ever seen, and she pitied the people who had to live in these squalid homes, under this dull smoke-curtained sky.

Mrs. Barnard had left Highclere by the earliest train, and hoped to return there at night. She had brought a hand-bag containing her night-gear, in case of being obliged to stay in London, being altogether a provident and practical little woman. She had a quiet courage and resolution which enabled her to face difficulties that would have daunted a weaker spirit. A stranger in London, ignorant of the ways of the town, without a friend to help her, she set about her work as calmly and as briskly as if the business that lay before her were the easiest thing in the world.

She found herself landed in Euston Square, and she had to make her way to the Temple. She was

chary of spending money, and she was an excellent walker, so finding, on inquiry from a policeman, that her destination was within two miles, she walked off through the streets and squares, Strand-wards, looking about her as she went, with those bright, penetrating eyes of hers, but never pausing on her way, save to make an inquiry where the route appeared doubtful.

This part of London struck her as more agreeable. The streets and squares had a respectable, old-established air. Everything was dingy and smoke-dried; but here there were shining windows, and newly whitened stoops, as Mrs. Barnard called the doorsteps. Here there were, at least, prosperity and cleanliness, though the brightness and blue sky of America were missing.

But by-and-by, when Jane Barnard found herself in the Temple, just as St. Dunstan's clock was chiming noon, she looked about her almost awe-stricken by the ancient air of the place—the old church, the old hall, the grave old Queen Anne houses, the fountain, the distant glimpse of garden and river. This was a kind of thing neither New

York nor Boston could show. This was the growth of centuries, a page out of history, printed in brick and stone; and Mrs. Barnard began to feel proud of the mother country.

She found her way to Elm Court, and, painted on the jamb of one of the doors, discovered the name she wanted—Fourth floor—Mr. Tomplin—Mr. Green—Mr. Collander.

‘I only hope I shall find him at home,’ she said to herself.

The fourth floor seemed a long way towards the skies; for the stairs were bad, and the ascent laborious; but the little woman tripped up the four double flights lightly and briskly, and gave a sigh of relief as she drew breath before Mr. Tomplin’s door—a black door, with Mr. Tomplin’s name painted upon it in white letters.

‘Come in,’ said a voice, in answer to her knock, and on opening the door she found herself face to face with a gentleman who was eating his breakfast at a table loaded and littered with papers and books of all kinds.

There was only the smallest pretence of a lobby

or passage between the outer door and this sanctum of law and domesticity ; but Mr. Tomplin did not seem abashed at being discovered breakfasting, though the hour was late and the whole thing had a dissipated air. He seemed a little surprised at the sex of his visitor, and that was all.

‘Come in, if you please,’ he said, rising to receive her, ‘and take a chair by the fire. Cold morning, isn’t it? I’m afraid you’ll find the room smell of bacon,’ he said apologetically, with a glance at the Dutch oven in the fender. ‘I’ve just been toasting some. Shall I open the window?’

‘Not on my account, if you please, sir. I am very sorry to have disturbed you at your breakfast.’

‘Don’t mention it. I ought not to be breakfasting so late, but the fact is, I was at a dance last night. They called it “small and early,” but that’s a matter of opinion. There were nearly a hundred people, and the dancing went on till four o’clock this morning.’

‘I’m afraid, sir, that I have taken a great liberty in calling upon you,’ began Mrs. Barnard, in a low, serious voice. ‘I feel that I have no right to come

here, except the right which one human being in distress has to ask for help from another. I am the daughter of that wretched man whom you defended at Highclere Assizes, and in whose innocence you believed when everybody else was against him.'

Mr. Tomplin smiled as he dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee. 'My dear soul,' he said, in a pleasant, friendly way, 'I am heartily glad your father's sentence has been commuted, if it were only for your sake. But why do you suppose I am a believer in his innocence?'

'You defended him, sir,' answered Jane naïvely.

'My dear madam, I should have defended the most double-dyed villain that ever figured in the Newgate Calendar. That is my profession. However, in this case I was certainly inclined to believe your father's story, incredible as it seemed that a man who had only committed a robbery should plead guilty to a murder. The man's manner impressed me. It was just conceivable to me that there might be a state of mind in which a man would thrust his neck into the public halter rather than string himself up with a rope of his own purchasing—a state of

mind akin to lunacy, but just short of it. A queer case altogether it seemed, and I tried to do my best with it ; particularly as it was the first murder case in which I was ever concerned, and I naturally felt interested in it,' added Mr. Tomplin cheerfully, as he stirred his coffee.

' You spoke nobly, sir, and like a man who had knowledge of the truth. I think you must know who the real murderer was,' said Jane Barnard, ' though perhaps you did not know enough to accuse him openly. In your examination of Sir Everard Courtenay it was evident you had some secret knowledge. I was told by a man who was in the court that day that Sir Everard turned deadly pale when you questioned him.'

' He did not relish my allusion to his wife. That was a random shot which seemed to hit the bull's-eye,' replied Mr. Tomplin lightly, as he eat his bacon and dry toast.

' But you must have had some knowledge, sir, which prompted that question ?' urged Jane Barnard.

' Very little. My brief was almost a blank. I

saw your father, and he could tell me nothing except that he found Mr. Blake's body in a ditch, saw the glimmer of his watch-chain, took watch and chain, and emptied the dead man's pockets. This occurred after dusk, between six and seven o'clock, as your father believes. I had hardly an idea as to what line of defence to take the afternoon before the trial, but in the coffee-room at the "Peacock" that evening I fell in with a talkative local doctor—a Mr. Jebb I think he was called—who had a great deal to say about the Blake murder, chiefly by insinuation and innuendo. It was he who suggested that Blake might have had an enemy—that there might have been jealousy. I had the greatest difficulty in getting at what he meant, for although the man wanted to talk he was desperately afraid of committing himself; but at last I got at the fact that Blake had been in love with Lady Courtenay, when she was Miss Rothney, and that it was just possible Sir Everard might have been jealous of him. "Did you ever hear that he was jealous?" I asked. "Did it ever come to your knowledge that there were any unpleasant scenes, or any quarrel between Sir Everard and

Blake?" "Never," says this Jebb. "I attended Lady Courtenay in her last illness, and I can vouch for it that Sir Everard was a devoted husband." "And you never knew of any quarrel between him and Blake?" I asked. "Never," says he. "Then, my dear fellow," says I, "all your insinuations end in smoke." Mr. Jebb just shrugs his shoulders and smiles blandly. "A man must talk about something," he says, "he can't be dumb. That's the distinction between him and the brute creation." I felt inclined to tell the man he was a humbug; but I made use of his suggestion, vague as it was, and fired my random shots, which, as you say, seem to have hit rather hard.'

'And you know nothing of the real murderer?'

'Nothing. And, my dear madam, why worry yourself about the matter any further? Your father's sentence has been commuted. The penalty he now suffers is no more than would have been the natural punishment of the robbery of which he freely admits his guilt. He has no ground for complaint.'

'No,' she answered. 'He is satisfied, poor soul. I don't think he will have to bear his punishment very long. But I have four children in America,

Mr. Tomplin, whose father is one of the best and truest men that ever lived. Are my sons and daughters to be told by-and-by that their grandfather was a murderer? Is my good husband to bear such a stigma as that upon his wife's name? All our friends in Boston know my maiden name. They will all have read about the trial at Highclere. I have come from America to clear my father's name, if I can.'

'I fear you have come upon a useless errand,' answered the barrister kindly. 'The question of Mr. Blake's murder has been set at rest for ever by your father's trial and condemnation. A jury has found him guilty. The commutation of the sentence is merely an act of mercy upon the part of the Crown.'

'But if it could be proved that another man committed the murder—if another man could be brought to confess his guilt——?'

'There is a great deal in such an if as that,' replied Mr. Tomplin, smiling at her earnestness.

'And you cannot help me in any way, sir? You can give me no hint—no clue?'

'Unfortunately, none. I am sorry you have had your journey for nothing.'

'Hardly that, sir. It is something to learn how little you knew when you cross-examined Sir Everard Courtenay, because you see, sir, I had been building my hopes on a rotten foundation. But there must have been something in his mind, or he would not have flinched at your questions.'

'I don't know that. A man might be sensitive about his dead wife's name. I felt myself a ruffian and a cad while I asked those questions ; but it was necessary to do something. I hope you believe that I did my best for your father.'

'I am sure of that, sir. I thank you for having received me so kindly. Good-day.'

'Good-day to you, and I wish your project were a more hopeful one,' answered Mr. Tomplin.

Mrs. Barnard left him as quietly as she had entered. She walked back to the station, finding her way easily enough this time, had a little over an hour to wait for a train, and was back at Highclere soon after dusk.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE WING.

MORTON'S surprise at hearing that Sir Everard and his daughter were on the point of starting for the South was as great as it was unpleasant. His first impulse when Dulcie told him where she was going was to go with her, but Sir Everard interfered.

‘Not for the world, my dear Morton,’ he said ; ‘your prospects must not be blighted because I have a weak chest. The Highclere election will be on early in February, and you have made up your mind to stand. You will have plenty of work to do in the meantime if you want to get in ; for from all I hear there will be a pretty sharp contest on the Liberal side, and you, as a new man, will have to fight your hardest. No, Morton, you look after your political interests while Dulcie and I ramble along the Riviera and cross over to Algiers for a quiet month or so

among the Moors. We shall be back, if all go well, with the swallows.'

'That is a long time for me to look forward to, sir,' answered Morton, pale and grave, with a glance of mournful tenderness at Dulcie, who stood by her father's side, her hand clasped in her lover's, her heart aching with a divided love. 'How am I to live without Dulcie all through three dreary months?'

'You managed to exist without her a good many years,' said the baronet, with a touch of cynicism.

'Because I did not know the world contained such a pearl; but knowing her, having won her, how am I to bear my life without her? Let me give up this election and come with you, Sir Everard. It will be like a foretaste of our honeymoon.'

'Such joys should never be anticipated. I have admired and sympathized with your ambition, Morton. It places you apart from and above the ruck of young men. I should despise you if you could surrender your hopes so lightly, and I think before you had been away from England a week you would despise yourself.'

‘If I did I should at least be happy.’

‘No, Morton; self-contempt and happiness are incompatible. You would be wretched.’

‘You must not come with us, Morton; indeed you must not,’ said Dulcie. ‘I should hate myself if for my sake you sacrificed your noble ambition.’

She looked at him with fond, admiring eyes, as if he were a hero and a martyr—as if, until he arose with the desire to legislate for his country, nobody had ever hoped, or cared, or striven for the welfare of mankind.

So, after some further argument, it was decided that Morton was only to go with the travellers as far as Paris, and that he was to spend the next month in preparing the ground for his election. The day after Sir Everard’s return from London was Saturday, and it was on Sunday evening that this conversation took place, as father and daughter sat by the fire in Dulcie’s morning-room, with Morton in his accustomed seat on the opposite side of the hearth. He had come over to Fairview directly after dinner, leaving his womankind to drive to evening service at Highclere. They were tremendous church-goers,

and never missed a service that they could manage to attend.

The lovers parted mournfully that evening, between ten and eleven, in the windy avenue, Dulcie having wrapped herself in her cloak, at Morton's request, and accompanied him as far as the gate.

'How little I thought this was hanging over me when we were so happy together on Christmas night!' said Morton discontentedly.

'When we were so happy,' echoed Dulcie, pouting a little. 'You mean when you and Lady Frances Grange were so happy together. I was not honoured with much of your society.'

'Dulcie, can you be jealous?' cried Morton, amazed.

'I think I could if I tried very hard,' faltered Dulcie.

'My darling, such a thought is unworthy of you. As for poor little Fan,' he went on, speaking of Lady Frances as if she were a favourite dog, 'she and I have a kind of adopted sister-and-brotherhood which is more familiar than friendship. She trusts me wholly, as I trust her, and she knows that there is

only one woman in the world I love, or ever can love. But don't let us waste the precious moments talking nonsense, Dulcie. I want to know more about this sudden indisposition of your father.'

'It is not sudden, Morton. Poor papa has been suffering at intervals for years. He would not tell me anything about it for fear he should grieve me, but careful as he has been to hide his pain from me, I know that he has suffered. He has had days of extreme depression; sleepless nights. I have been watchful of him, and have felt many a pang of fear, but I have tried to hide my anxiety. And now the London doctor has told him that he has a mortal malady. His life can only be prolonged by extreme care. Can you blame me, Morton, if I wish to do all that love can do to cherish and comfort him?'

'No, dearest, I cannot blame you; but I wish you were my wife.'

'Why?'

'Because in that case either I should go with you, or you would not go at all.'

'But you are going with us as far as Paris.'

'A fig for Paris. What is that beggarly stage of

the journey? Four-and-twenty hours at most, and stretched to that only by dawdling a little at the Lord Warden. It is a contemptible boon to be allowed to escort you to Paris.'

'If you are disagreeable you shall stay at Tangley.'

The church clock struck eleven, and they parted, half in playfulness and half in sorrow. The travellers were to start early the following afternoon by the Highclere express. Dulcie devoted the morning to wandering about the house, looking fondly at those home treasures she was to leave for a time. Then she went to her own room, and put in order drawers and wardrobes which had been disordered in the hurry of packing. Her maid had had as much as she could do to get everything ready in time for this sudden journey. She and Sir Everard's valet were to accompany the travellers. Nothing could be more marked than the contrast between the two servants, Emma Pew, a simple-minded ruddy-cheeked rustic, and Stanton, a man of the world, a soldier of fortune, speaking half a dozen Continental languages, as much at home in any corner of Europe as at

Austhorpe, ready for any adventure. To him the idea of starting for Algeria was delight, to Emma it was a source of fear and dread. Some one had officiously informed her that Algiers was on the coast of Africa, and the very name of the dark continent had inspired horror and aversion.

‘Isn’t Africa a dreadful place, Mr. Stanton?’ she asked, ‘a savage sandy country, where there’s nothing but poisonous swamps, and niggers, and lions climbing up trees—or perhaps it is the travellers that climb to get out of the way of the lions.’

‘Oh, Algiers isn’t half a bad place,’ answered Stanton, in his easy way; ‘capital climate, fine sea, picturesque costumes, decent hotels; and as to lions—well, yes, I dare say we might have a chance of seeing a lion hunt.’

This was enough for Emma Pew. From this moment lions roamed up and down the streets of Algiers in the fancy picture of that city which her distempered imagination set before her.

And now Emma had done her work, and all Dulcie’s belongings were packed and in the hall ready to be carried off to the station; and, having done her

duty, Miss Pew, much disturbed and excited by the journey before her, had gone off to employ her last leisure hours in Daleshire in taking leave of her parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, and cousins. Thus Dulcie was left alone in rooms which already had a deserted look.

Her bedroom was the same which her mother had occupied in her brief span of married life, a lovely room with wide square windows overlooking the lawns and shrubberies, the low-lying lake and the wide expanse of landscape beyond. At one end of the room there was an oriel, fronting south, and in this sunny window was Dulcie's favourite seat. Here she had a little table with an easel; here she painted flowers or fruit with a delicacy of touch and tone rare in an amateur hand; here she worked, or read, or wrote, through many a busy morning. It was the room in which she had been born, in which her mother had died. Sir Everard had removed himself to the furthest end of the house after his wife's death, and had never since that hour entered this room save once when Dulcie was ill. But for Dulcie there was no terror in this chamber where death had come—

where the young and lovely wife had lain in her last slumber. It was hallowed rather by that sad memory. She loved to look at the objects on which her mother's eye had rested, to sit in the low tapestried arm-chair which had been her mother's favourite seat, to handle the old china cups and saucers on the mantelpiece, the duodecimo volumes of classic prose and poetry on the hanging bookshelves by the bed, knowing that her mother's touch had rested on them.

To-day she moved slowly about the room, looking wistfully at familiar objects, wondering idly when she would see them again. Presently she paused, half in absence of mind, before an old Japanese cabinet, and began to pull out the drawers one by one, looking listlessly at their contents. In one she saw a few old letters of her own, notes of invitation, programmes of concerts at Highclere, rubbish of all kinds; in another there were shells, in another some withered flowers gathered a year or two ago in her Alpine rambles, in another worn-out paint-brushes, and half-empty colour-tubes. Another, and this she handled reverently, had been undisturbed since her

mother's death. She had laid a folded sheet of tissue-paper over the contents, trifling as they were, the mere jetsam and flotsam of daily life. To-day, in sheer idleness of mind, she lifted the paper, and began to rearrange the trifles which her loving hands had carefully covered years ago, when first she took possession of her mother's room.

What frivolous relics of a departed life they were yet how suggestive of youth and elegant pleasures!—a broken fan of delicately carved ivory and painted vellum, graces and sylphs disporting in a world of flowers, a long white glove, embroidered with gold, still bearing the impress of the little hand that had worn it; a Dijon rose, which still exhaled the faint suggestion of a long-departed sweetness; two or three pieces of rare old lace, yellow with age; a few letters, closely written and crossed, from married sisters; a handful of dead violets; and, lastly, something which filled Dulcie with wonder, simple as the thing was in itself.

A yellow ribbon, the very colour and texture of that old-fashioned ribbon which Dulcie had found on the hearth-rug in Dora Blake's sitting-room.

She sat with the ribbon in her hand, about a yard in length, not soiled or worn, but with folds that showed that it had been tied, perhaps as a loop for that broken fan. Yes, it was exactly the same ribbon; there could be no doubt of it. Either Dora Blake must have got her piece from Lady Courtenay, or Lady Courtenay must have got hers from Aunt Dora.

‘Unless there was a rage for this kind of ribbon at that time,’ thought Dulcie, ‘but that can hardly be, for I am sure this ribbon is more than twenty years old. It is the sort of thing our great-grandmothers wore. Well, it is a small mystery to worry one’s brain about. Miss Blake must have given a piece to mamma, or mamma to Miss Blake. That is certain.’

She remembered Aunt Dora’s somewhat confused and troubled manner when she had talked about the yellow ribbon. Could such a trifle as that involve some sorrowful memory—some association full of pain and sadness? Vain to sit wondering there. Dulcie lifted the ribbon to her lips before she put it back in the drawer.

‘Poor little ribbon, stray leaflet from the past.

I am sure you are half a century old. You had curious, half-tender associations for my dear mother, I dare say, when she wore you to tie up a bunch of roses, or as a loop for her fan. You may have belonged to some maiden aunt, a famous belle, perhaps, who died in her youth—or to some dear old indulgent grandmamma, who wore yellow ribbons in her cap. For me your history is a blank, as mysterious as the life of Cheops.'

She closed the drawer and locked the cabinet, and then resumed her progress through the rooms, till it was time for luncheon, after which hurried meal the carriage came to the door, and Morton arrived with his travelling bag.

It was a pleasant journey for Dulcie and Morton, in spite of the parting that lay before them at the end of the way. For these two it was happiness to be together. Sir Everard seemed more cheerful when he had turned his back upon Fairview. He talked about the coming election, discussed Morton's hopes, and gave him some good advice, which the young man fully appreciated.

They stayed a couple of days in Paris to please

Morton, went the round of churches and galleries which all had seen before, but which Dulcie was delighted to see in her lover's society; drove in the wintry Bois; saw all the world of fashion and beauty; wasted a good deal of money at Boissiers, buying artistic caskets and dainty satin boxes filled with sugar-plums; dined at the last restaurant à la mode; and wound up with a delightful evening at Molière's classic theatre, where the elegant Favart and the seductive Delaunay played an idyllic drama by De Musset. Those two days were full of delight for Morton. They were only too brief, and then on the evening of the second he drove with Sir Everard and his daughter to the Lyons station, and saw them seated in the train which was to carry them to the South.

'I shall come to you directly the election is over,' he said, 'if you have not returned before then.'

'My dear fellow, Parliament will meet by the time the election is over, and you will have your senatorial duties to attend to,' replied Sir Everard.

Morton stood by the carriage door, with Dulcie's

hand clasped in his, till the last moment. It was their first parting. They looked at each other with pale, pained faces, tearless but despairing. Then came the guards bustling along, authoritative, military of aspect; then the rush and turmoil of people who could not find places; then a shriek, a whistle—their clinging hands parted—and Dulcie was gone. Morton went gloomily back to the shabby, half-built boulevard outside the big station.

‘What a horrid place Paris is for a man to be alone in!’ he said to himself, as he walked back to the Bristol. ‘I shall be off at seven to-morrow morning.’

He was at Tangley by eleven o’clock on the following night, moody and out of spirits, feeling that all the delight and hopefulness of his life was gone.

‘How fondly, how intensely she loves him!’ he said to himself, thinking of Dulcie and her father. ‘Would to God that I could trust him as she trusts him—that I could honour him as she honours him. Yes, for her sake I would be blind, if heaven would grant me the gift of blindness. But I cannot forget how

he shrank from answering my question that night—
how he put me off with generalities, with indignant
assertions that evaded the point at issue.'

CHAPTER VI.

DULCIE SACRIFICES HERSELF.

IT was early in February, and all along the sunlit Riviera the world was waking to the first faint breath of spring. A sapphire sky reflected itself in a sapphire sea, and save for a murderous cold wind now and then, the sojourner in that southern world might flatter himself that he had cheated time out of a winter.

Sir Everard and his daughter had been roving along the seaboard, stopping a few days here and a week there, and hurrying off impatiently from another place at the whim of the invalid, who was curiously restless and difficult to please. He missed his library, and the quiet life of Fairview, which perhaps was more congenial to his meditative character than any other kind of life, albeit he had never seemed quite happy even at Fairview.

Dulcie bore with his whims, and soothed his rest-

less spirits with inexhaustible patience. Every other hope and wish in her mind had given place to the one ardent desire to spin out the weak thread of her father's days—to sweeten the remnant of his life.

She bore without a murmur her separation from Morton, dearly as she loved him, and although it seemed to her as if all the brightness and youth were taken out of her life now that he and she were parted. The key-note of her existence was not gladness, but resignation.

Her father's health seemed to improve after they reached the South, but his spirits were variable, and that restlessness which Dulcie noticed soon after they left Paris—that utter weariness of soul which made the shortest winter day too long—was almost worse than physical pain or weakness. Nothing they saw in their shifting from place to place interested or amused him. He avoided society as much as possible, and most of all avoided his own countrymen, who were to be found in possession of the hotels wherever they went.

‘If we could only find some quiet place where you and I could be alone together with nature and

our favourite books!’ he said to Dulcie; and in quest of this tranquil retreat they travelled backwards and forwards along the sea-coast, in a vague, purposeless way which would have been dispiriting to a business-like tourist.

At last, a little way inland from Marseilles, out of the beat of the common run of travellers, Sir Everard found a spot that pleased him. It was a little town on the side of a sandy hill, crested with pines. A few villas were scattered among the pine trees. The air was exhilarating, and there was a distant view of the Mediterranean. It was something like Bournemouth, before Bournemouth became a popular watering-place.

Sir Everard hired one of the white-walled villas near the top of the hill, a small low house, sheltered on the landward side by a thick grove of pines, its front windows overlooking a wide sweep of blue water.

‘Here we will stay till we cross to Algiers,’ said Sir Everard, and he seemed in no hurry to visit the African shore.

He ordered a piano from Marseilles, and a big

case of new books from Paris, and settled himself down to his old studious and meditative life, with something of the old repose. Dulcie was delighted.

The mornings were warm enough for them to sit out of doors among the pine trees; the sun was sometimes so hot at noontide as to necessitate the use of Dulcie's biggest parasol.

'I really think we have succeeded in running away from the winter, papa,' she said gaily. 'You ought to buy this villa, and then we could come here every year.'

'The world is wide, my darling. Why should we anchor ourselves to one spot? We may winter in Egypt next year.'

'And then Morton will be with us, will he not, papa?' hazarded Dulcie, blushing. 'I suppose I shall be married before this year is ended? You know, dearest, I don't mean my marriage to separate me from you. I shall be your daughter all the same, and obedient to you in all things. Morton will be your adopted son.'

'You do not know what you are talking about, Dulcie,' answered her father impatiently. 'The kind

of thing you propose is not possible. Other daughters have talked like you, time out of mind, and it has all ended in nothing. When Desdemona marries she follows her Moor to Cyprus, and poor old Brabantio is deserted.'

'I think in the play, papa, that is Brabantio's fault. It was he who flung off his daughter.'

It was on the evening after this conversation that Dulcie and her father were sitting side by side in the verandah, watching the moonlit waves, and the yellow lights of the little town twinkling under a purple sky. The post had come in half an hour ago. There had been several letters for Sir Everard, but none for Dulcie. He had been silent and gloomy since the reading of his letters, and his daughter feared that one of them must have brought ill news of some kind. Whatever it might be, she waited patiently for him to reveal his trouble, feeling that it was wiser to leave him undisturbed till he chose to speak. She was at his side, ready to be his confidant if he needed her sympathy.

They had sat almost in silence for nearly half an hour, when Sir Everard laid his hand gently on his

daughter's shoulder and drew her nearer to him.

‘Dulcie,’ he said softly, ‘are you happy with me?’

‘Quite happy, dear father.’

‘And this retired, studious life, hidden from the world, unambitious, uneventful, pleases and satisfies you?’

‘I can imagine no pleasanter kind of life.’

‘That is well,’ he answered, and then relapsed into silence for some minutes.

‘My darling,’ he began after that long pause, ‘I think you know that I love you. I think you will believe, however inconsistent my conduct may seem, that I love you as truly and as dearly as father ever loved daughter since this world was created.’

‘Yes, papa, I have perfect faith in your love,’ she answered, trembling a little.

‘And yet I am going to distress you. I am going to ask you to sacrifice something very dear to your heart.’

‘Sacrifice is the proof of love, dear father,’ she answered gently. ‘I am prepared to make any sacrifice for your sake.’

‘I want you to give up Morton.’

‘Father!’ she exclaimed with a faint cry, as if of physical pain. ‘Yes, I thought it was that,’ she said quietly.

‘There are reasons why your union with him could never bring happiness either to him or to you. I felt this when he first proposed for you, and I set my face against such an engagement, as you know. In an evil hour, seeing that your heart was concerned in the matter, I weakly yielded. But I have felt ever since that I have done wrong. I have felt more firmly convinced as time went by that the engagement must result in misery.’

‘But why, father? for what reason? I am ready to obey you. I am willing to make any sacrifice for your sake. Yes, even to part from him who is dearer to me than anything on earth except yourself. You shall always be first. I have told you that. But pray do not treat me like a child. If there is some good reason why Morton and I cannot be happy together, let me know it, and understand it, and I will accept my fate.’

‘Unfortunately I cannot tell you my reason. You must take it on trust.’

‘And did this same reason influence you when you first refused to sanction our engagement?’

‘In part, yes.’

‘Oh, father, why did you yield then? I could easier have borne to give him up then than now. Every hour we have spent together has made him nearer and dearer to me, until he has become a part of my life. It would have been better for me if you had been cruel then, if you had been blind to my silent regret, and let the sorrow wear itself out. Perhaps it would have worn itself out in time; though I fancied it was going to be the sorrow of a lifetime.’

‘All fancy, dear child,’ answered Sir Everard soothingly. ‘Hearts are not so easily broken. Steel yourself to endure the agony of a sudden wrench, and a year hence you will wonder that this sacrifice could have cost you so much.’

‘You say that! Yet you have never forgotten my mother.’

Sir Everard started, like one who feels a sudden touch upon an old wound—a touch that thrills through every nerve.

‘That was different,’ he answered huskily. ‘She was my wife, my own. We had one short year of bliss, and then came—ruin. No man could forget such a blow as that. But a girl’s first lover is like a child’s first doll—dearer than anything else in the world, till she gets a new one.’

‘Father!’ cried Dulcie, with a sob.

‘Yes, I know I must seem hard and cruel, but I have your welfare at heart, darling. This marriage could not make you happy. There is that in Morton’s character which must result in misery to you.’

‘He is noble-minded, conscientious, truthful—full of thought for others.’

‘You cannot read him as I read him, or know him as I know him. But I will urge this question no further. If you have made up your mind to marry him, in opposition to my most urgent desire, let the engagement go on. But if you want to make me happy you must give up Morton Blake.’

‘You know that I would lay down my life for your happiness. But this is so strange, so sudden. You give me no reason, or only a vague reason, for such an act. My mind is utterly bewildered.’

‘Take a week to think about it,’ said Sir Everard, quietly.

‘That looks like disobedience.’

‘My love, I will not so think of it. I know that I must seem to you inconsistent, arbitrary, cruel even. But, as I live, Dulcie, the grief I would have you endure for my sake to-day, will save you a more terrible grief in the future. I should have foreseen this earlier. I have been weak, blameworthy. I am a sinner, and I need all your charity, all your patience.’

‘You are the best and dearest of men,’ sobbed Dulcie, with her tearful face hidden upon his breast. ‘How could I hope to have you and Morton? It would be too much for heaven to grant to one woman.’

Then, after a pause, she lifted her head, and looked in her father’s face with an almost childlike simplicity.

‘Papa, if I give him up, do you think he will marry Lady Frances?’

‘I think it is not improbable.’

‘That will make my life harder to bear. That will be very bitter.’

Not another word was said about Morton, either by Sir Everard or his daughter. This confirmed an idea that had flashed across Dulcie's mind when Sir Everard began to speak about her renunciation of Morton. She loved her father with such perfect trustfulness that she could not believe him capable of wantonly grieving her. He would not have asked her to make this sacrifice without some good and sufficient reason, and it might be that he withheld that reason rather than wound her womanly pride by telling her that Morton was false or fickle.

She had felt a few faint pangs of jealousy that Christmas night at Tangle, when Morton and Frances were waltzing, with the air of people to whom it was natural to be together. Many a careless familiarity of Frances Grange's had struck her on that Christmas Day. Every word she said to Morton revealed a long and intimate acquaintance—the friendly association of years; while an undefinable something in the lady's tone and manner hinted at a warmer feeling than friendship.

Brooding upon these past impressions, and even exaggerating them in the light of her new-born fears,

Dulcie gradually convinced herself that her father knew more of Morton's sentiments than he cared to tell her. She remembered that curious change in her lover's manner which had wounded and alarmed her during the period before the trial at Highclere. She remembered his fitful spirits, his intervals of silence and moodiness—all accounted for at the time by his anxiety as to the result of the trial. Looking back at his conduct now, she told herself that this trouble of mind might have marked the gradual arising of a change of feeling, the slow awakening to the consciousness that Frances Grange—endeared by old associations—had a stronger hold upon his heart than the girl whom he had chosen for his wife.

Always doubtful of her own merits, it seemed to Dulcie that Lady Frances was fascinating enough to lure any lover away from such an insignificant little person as herself. Yet the thought of Morton's inconstancy stung her to the quick, and it needed all her courage and all her pride to bear the blow.

Dulcie played to her father, and read to him, and walked with him, and drove with him in the usual

way ; smiled at him, even, when he was inclined to be cheerful ; but the sweet young face had a pale, rigid look, that went to Sir Everard's heart. He suffered almost as acutely as she did.

One morning, in something less than a week after that conversation in the verandah, Dulcie came to her father as he sat writing letters in the sunny little room which he had made his study.

‘ Papa, will you please write me the draft of a letter to Morton, telling him that he and I are to part ? ’ she asked meekly. ‘ I don't know how to say it. ’

Sir Everard wrote the letter, and Dulcie copied it, adding a few lines of her own, and brought it to him ready for the mid-day mail.

CHAPTER VII.

WHISTLED DOWN THE WIND.

FEBRUARY was over, and the Highclere election had begun in the cold and rain of a severe March. The Conservative interest was strong in the old county town, and Morton Blake found that he had a hard fight before him. He was not a popular man in his neighbourhood. He was respected and liked by his equals; they knew his sterling qualities; but that lower section of society which sees a landed proprietor only from the outside did not care about Morton Blake. They knew him only as a young man of reserved manners, who never drank or played billiards at the 'Peacock;' who was rarely seen at local race meetings, and took no part in local cricket matches. Middle-aged people who remembered his father took delight in disparaging the son. His liberal opinions went against him among people who were always praising the days that were gone, and who considered free trade the ruin of England. If he had been a

good old Tory, and had clamoured for the revival of the sliding scale, he would have had plenty of supporters among the farmers and burgesses of Southern Daleshire. But opinions which would have won him friends at Blackford only made him enemies at Highclere. Education for the million, and coffee taverns, and national thrift, and even a cheap loaf were questions of no interest to a town which had grown up and flourished upon ignorance, beer, and high prices. Then he had Sir Nathaniel Ritherdon for his opponent, a man who spent a great deal of money in the town, who was known to be a sworn foe to all co-operative associations, whose opinions were so mildly commonplace, and whose utterances were so amiably vague that he pleased everybody. Morton fought his battle honestly and well. He was a fine speaker, expressing himself with a vigorous directness which won praise even from those who objected to his politics as dangerous and revolutionary. He had a noble voice—deep, resonant—and he knew how to use it. He had a handsome, intelligent face and a good figure, and he was admired as a fine specimen of the English Radical. But as a Radical he was

feared, and his electioneering tactics were somewhat too bold and independent to succeed with an old-fashioned borough like Highclere, where, with the advance of civilization, direct and open bribery had only given place to indirect corruption. His agent plainly told Morton that the line he was taking was not the road to success; whereupon Morton replied that he would stand or fall as an honest man should.

‘Then I’m sorry to say I think you’ll fall,’ answered the agent. ‘Mind, I’m not the man to counsel anything like bribery; but there’s such a thing as being too squeamish in electioneering matters. The code of honour is a trifle wider, you see, in a business of that kind than——’

‘I never heard of but one code of honour, and I shall regulate my conduct by that,’ said Morton.

‘Obstinate fool,’ thought the agent. ‘Is it meanness, or rustic prejudice, I wonder, that influences him?’

Then he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders,—

‘I take it that your object is to get into Parliament, and that the mode and manner of your getting there is a detail which you could afford to leave in the hands of a trustworthy agent. Yours is not the first

craft that I've navigated through some ugly shoals.'

'I wouldn't go to heaven if I had to get there by a dirty road,' retorted Morton.

The result was exactly as the agent had anticipated. Sir Nathaniel spent two thousand pounds upon bill-sticking, beer, and indirect bribery, and came in at the head of the poll; Morton spent nine hundred upon stationery, postage stamps, agents' fees, and the hire of a room in which to give utterance to his opinions, and his name was lowest in the list. An intelligent minority had voted for him as an earnest politician and an original thinker; but the masses were true to the old candidate, who knew the way to their hearts.

Morton went home to Tanglely after the election, sorely depressed and disappointed. His agent had told him that he would fail; but his belief in the goodness and honesty of his fellow-men had been stronger than his belief in the agent's acumen. He had seen a crowded audience thrill as he spoke; he had seen the glow of enthusiasm in men's faces; he had heard the accent of truth in their loud cheers. He

knew that he had touched the hearts of the best among the electors, that he had shown them his mind, convinced them of his earnestness. And yet the majority preferred to be represented by a twaddling old gentleman, who spoke once or twice in a session, and then delivered himself of truisms which had been old-fashioned, or obsolete, in the days when Samuel Johnson was a parliamentary reporter.

At home Morton found unlimited sympathy. His aunt consoled him with quiet sweetness; his sisters were loudly indignant, but not without reproachfulness.

‘If you had let us give more garden parties last summer, such an insult could never have been offered to the family,’ protested Tiny.

‘If you had taken more interest in the bazaar in aid of the restoration of the frescoes in the chancel of St. Mary’s, all the church people would have voted for you,’ said Horatia, who was enthusiastic about things ecclesiastical.

‘I hope you will never again stand for Highclere,’ said Lizzie Hardman, pale with indignation. ‘The stupid people are not worthy of you. At Blackford you would be appreciated. My uncle and my brother

were delighted with your speeches. I sent them the Highclere paper with the report of the meetings at which you spoke. They are only working people, and perhaps I ought not to talk about their opinions here. But they are warm politicians.'

'My dear Lizzie, I am very glad to be appreciated by them,' Morton answered kindly.

He had turned with a touch of weariness from his sisters' reproaches, and even from his aunt's consolations, but these remarks of Lizzie's had a soothing effect. It was something to be understood even by brawny-armed workers at Blackford. Was it not precisely this class whose interests he had most at heart, the rugged sons of toil, from whose ranks his grandfather had risen?

Among his women-kind he bore himself bravely, too proud to let any one see how deeply he was disappointed, how ardently he had hoped for a different result. He made light of the matter when Tiny and Horatia harped upon the iniquity of elections in general, and the shameless ingratitude of the electors of Highclere in particular.

'I'm sure the money we have spent in that town

would make a golden obelisk as big as Cleopatra's Needle, if it could all be melted down,' said Tiny petulantly; 'and *now* I hope you will let us belong to the Civil Service Co-operative Stores, and get our Berlin wool and things at wholesale prices.'

Morton went to smoke his cigar on the common directly after dinner in order to escape such sympathy as this. Bleak and moonless as the night was, it was pleasanter to him to ramble among these black furze bushes by the narrow sandy paths which he had known from a child, than to sit in the drawing-room and hear his sisters bewail his failure. He was altogether depressed and out of spirits. A week had gone by without bringing him any letter from Dulcie, who until now had written every other day. He began to fear that she was ill, or that Sir Everard was worse—dying, perhaps—and his daughter alone with him in a strange country.

'There is one comfort in my failure,' he said to himself. 'There is nothing to tie me to England now. I shall start for Marseilles to-morrow morning, and surprise Dulcie in her villa among the pine trees.'

After a long walk about the common he went

home, wonderfully cheered at the prospect of a speedy meeting with Dulcie. He went straight to his dressing-room, and packed his portmanteau, being at all times supremely independent of service. He consulted Bradshaw, found that there was no possibility of starting before the night mail from Dover, and then, some time after midnight, went to bed, with very little hope of sleeping.

In this he was agreeably disappointed, for, worn out with the excitement and the fatigue of the day, he slept heartily and long, and on waking found the wintry sun shining in at his window, and half a dozen letters on the table by his bed.

Among them there was the long-looked-for letter from Dulcie, a poor thin letter, instead of the usual three or four sheets of foreign paper. A withered violet dropped from the envelope as he tore it open.

‘An emblem of my disappointed hopes,’ said Morton, thinking of yesterday’s failure.

This was Dulcie’s letter :—

‘MY DEAR MORTON,—After serious and painful consideration my father has resolved upon withdrawing his consent to our marriage. He has

reasons of his own which he does not think fit to tell me, and I, as in duty bound, submit to his decision. If he were to tell me to lay my head upon the block, blindfold, I would do it; and in the same spirit of blind obedience to his will I write this letter.

‘I hope you will forgive me if this act of mine should give you any pain; but I have some reasons of my own for believing that the rupture of our engagement will be rather a relief to you than a regret.

‘I have packed all the presents you so generously gave me in a box, to be sent by rail—except the pretty vellum-bound “*In Memoriam*,” which I venture to keep as a souvenir of our friendship.

‘Your always faithful friend,

‘DULCIBELLA COURTENAY.’

Even the signature of this brief letter had an awful look. She had never so signed herself before. ‘Your own Dulcie,’ ‘Your loving Dulcie,’ ‘Your fondest, truest Dulcie.’ This had been the style of thing for the last year—and now, with a grand flourish of her pen, bold and free as if the hand that

wrote had never trembled or faltered for a moment, appeared this formal signature, which looked formidable enough for a death-warrant—‘DULCIBELLA COURTENAY.’

The first two sentences in the letter were her father’s composition. The rest was her own.

Morton could not tell that the brief, formal note had been wrung from a breaking heart. He only felt the cruelty of the stroke. He was coldly, curtly dismissed; and that was all.

‘She could hardly write less if she were sending away a servant,’ he said to himself.

And then, re-reading the letter, and seeing that the act was Sir Everard’s, and that Dulcie was only the instrument, a horrible idea flashed upon him.

‘Why, this is his retaliation for the doubts I ventured to express that last night at Fairview,’ he said to himself. ‘I remember his livid look of anger—the passion with which he repelled my questions. Oh, there can be no longer a doubt. It was he whose horse’s hoofs were printed on the spot where my father fell; it was he—false friend—jealous husband—who struck that deadly blow, and not the

cur who lies rotting in Portland Prison. My hideous fear—the horror I have struggled to shut out of my mind—was not a baseless apprehension. I accept my release. Yes, Dulcie, you are right. It is a relief to me to be free. Dearly as I love you, my sweet one, it is better that I should be free to avenge my father's murder. That is my first duty. Would Orestes have stopped to make love and take a wife when once his task was set for him—when once he knew what fate had given him to do? Oh, my poor, pretty Ophelia, I will take back my gifts, the pledges of a happy love. Such bliss was never meant for you and me. For me life has sterner claims and harder duties. For you—oh, my love, my love, what is to become of you if I pursue the purpose that is in my mind? Is your gentle heart to be broken?’

He read the letter again, and saw Sir Everard's hand in it. Could Dulcie, who had so innocently revealed to him the singleness of her heart, the depth of her love, could she thus whistle him down the wind? No; the letter had been wrung from her bleeding heart. That curt dismissal, so coldly worded, was doubtless the result of a bitter struggle.

It was to bring about this separation that Sir Everard had taken his daughter away. Even the story of his ill-health was perhaps a pretence invented to this end.

Morton answered Dulcie's letter with even greater brevity than her own.

'DEAREST,—I accept your decree, but I shall love you to the end of my life. Whatever may happen, even if it be my fate to bring you sorrow, remember and believe this always—I love, have loved, and shall love you only.

'MORTON.

'P.S.—God bless you for keeping the little Tennyson.'

'So ends an old song,' he said to himself.

He avoided making an appearance at the family breakfast-table by pleading the press of important business, letters that must be written in time for the mid-day post; knowing that the too penetrating eyes of his aunt and sisters, to say nothing of Lizzie Hardman's steadfast gaze, would read his agitation in his pale, troubled face.

‘I don’t mean to tell them anything yet awhile,’ he said to himself.

Perhaps that one particular detail in all the circumstances of his grief which a man most dreads and abhors in such a case is the overwhelming sympathy of his feminine acquaintances. This morning Morton would have thought Alexander Selkirk in his desert island the most enviable character on the face of the globe.

His aunt Dora brought the breakfast-tray to the library, and stood beside his chair, and bent over him, and laid her soft, cool hand on his burning forehead.

‘My dearest boy, you are in a fever,’ she exclaimed. ‘You must have had a sleepless night?’

‘No, auntie, I slept wonderfully well.’

‘Yet you look so pale and haggard. My poor boy, I’m afraid you feel this disappointment more than I thought you did from your manner last night.’

‘Well, I am naturally a little provoked at a dumb dog like good pompous old Sir Nathaniel being preferred to an energetic young man with ideas of his own. But I shall soon get over it,

auntie. I have had a good deal of worry and work, you know, in the last three weeks, and that has exhausted me.'

'I see you had a letter from Dulcie this morning,' said Miss Blake, one of whose many duties was the opening of the post-bag, 'but not the usual budget. I hope Sir Everard is no worse.'

'No, he is about the same.'

'And Dulcie, is she quite well?'

'Oh yes; she is pretty well.'

'Sweet child! How I miss her! She is such a loving little soul. Try to get a little more sleep, Morton, when you have finished your letters. You look tired to death.'

'Really, dear aunt, there is nothing amiss with me. And when I have written my letters I am going off on a short journey. I have some business to do at Avonmore, and I shall not be home till nearly midnight. Don't let anybody except Andrew sit up for me, that's a dear good auntie.'

'At Avonmore! What can you possibly have to do at Avonmore?'

'Nothing very particular; but I am glad to have

something to occupy me this afternoon, as it will put the election out of my head.'

'That is an advantage, certainly. But pray don't tire yourself at Avonmore.'

'No fear of that. I shall drive over to Highclere in the dog-cart, and Sims can put up there and bring me back at night. And now, best of aunts, if I am to write my letters——'

'I must leave you to yourself. Yes, I understand. Give my fondest love to Dulcie.'

'That letter was written before I came downstairs. Shall I put your message on the envelope, to be spelt out by all the postmen between here and Provence?'

'Well, I think not. I shall write to my pet this afternoon. If I were to tell her how ill and wretched you look this morning she'd be miserable.'

'Tell her I am well and happy,' said Morton, with a curious laugh. 'There is nothing like putting a good face upon things.'

Morton's letters were only an excuse for being alone. He wrote a few lines to his parliamentary agent, enclosing a cheque—for even failure is expensive; wrote with friendly brevity to Sir Nathaniel

congratulating him on his triumph; and then he flung himself into his arm-chair, and sat with his elbows on his knees, brooding upon the past and forecasting the future.

His path was dark, and beset with difficulty. He could hardly take a step forward which would not hasten the coming of sorrow to the girl he loved. Yet to stand still, or to go back, seemed to him impossible.

CHAPTER VIII.

POOR LUCY.

AVONMORE is one of the genteelest towns in England. There is positively nothing common or unclean in it. It manufactures nothing, it gives employment to nobody, it knows nothing of the working classes, it has no outer fringe of shabby streets and labouring-men's cottages. It is a pure and perfect chrysolite set in the garden-land of England, a land of green pastures, watered by a picturesque but weedy river that never turned a mill or served any useful purpose in its life, but which glides along its serpentine course placidly, between willow-shaded banks. The High Street is as broad as Regent Street, and sparkles with shops which only appeal to the wealthy. The two chief hotels are as elegantly luxurious and as expensive as Claridge's. The gentle slopes which the natives call hills are dotted with white-walled villas, girdled with exquisitely kept gardens, rich in monkey-

trees, deodaras, Wellingtonias, and all the aristocracy of foreign timber.

‘The finest society in England is to be had at Avonmore,’ said Mr. Churchill Green, as he finished his hashed mutton, and turned his chair to the fire in the untidy little back parlour behind his shop, ‘but it is an infernally stagnant hole for a man to earn his living in.’

His wife sat in a low chair in the opposite corner of the hearth nursing her last baby. A sickly mother with hollow, hectic cheeks and a dry, hacking cough; a flabby-looking infant, dribbling in an imbecile manner over a soiled and crumpled pinafore.

‘I don’t know how it is for other people,’ replied Mrs. Green mournfully; ‘some of them seem to get on well enough, and even to make their fortunes, but it doesn’t answer with us. Perhaps if you were to stick closer to business, Churchill——’

‘Closer to business,’ echoed Mr. Green scornfully; will my closeness bring customers? If I were to be as close as an oyster, would that fill my shop? Didn’t I stay at home and sit yawning over the *Telegraph* behind that blessed counter all yesterday after-

noon? and what are we the richer for my self-denial?’

‘Two young ladies came, Churchill.’

‘Yes, and after turning over three portfolios of songs and waltzes decided there was nothing they cared about, and walked out of the shop without spending sixpence. I wish I dealt in cheeses, or eel pies, or rags and bones, or pigs’ trotters,’ cried Churchill savagely, ‘for then I might find an appreciative public.’

‘I have often advised you to try some other business,’ said the wife, with meek reproachfulness, the kind of half-resigned, half-complaining, and wholly miserable tone which irritates a husband’s nerves like the perpetual dropping of water—a small nuisance, but horrible from its continuity.

‘Oh, hang it all,’ exclaimed Churchill, as he knocked the ashes out of his blackened meerschaum, ‘I couldn’t stand an ungentlemanly trade if it were to bring in thousands.’

Lucy Green gave a little whimpering sigh as she bent over the sickly baby, and lifted the limp little hand to her lips.

‘I wouldn’t care what the trade was if it gave us good food and decent clothes, Charley,’ she said. She always called her husband Charley when she was most in earnest. ‘I’m sure I felt as bad as if somebody was putting a knife into me this afternoon, when I saw those children going to school in patched clothes and worn-out boots. What’s the good of waiting for concert engagements that don’t come? If it wasn’t for a circus now and then, and a piano or two to tune, you wouldn’t earn a five-pound note in a twelvemonth. It’s only the kindness of—my friends’—she faltered a little here, and looked furtively at her husband, whose face had clouded over with a sudden scowl—‘it’s only their kindness keeps us from starvation.’

‘Perhaps if your friends were a little less mysterious in their benevolence I might feel more grateful,’ retorted Mr. Green. ‘But it isn’t a pleasant idea for a husband that his wife gets her money from nobody knows whom.’

‘The money seems as welcome to you as to me, Charley. You always help to spend it.’

‘I suppose I have a right to live, Lucy.’

‘Nobody denies that, Churchill. Don’t I slave to put a decent dinner on the table, and feed the poor children on bread and treacle half the week, so that you may have a little bit of hot supper when you come home tired of a night? But it does seem hard upon us all when you go and spend money in a tavern parlour rather than make yourself happy at home.’

‘Happy!’ echoed Green, with a contemptuous survey of the shabby room and the faded wife. ‘A fine place for a man to be happy in—a chorus of squalling brats, varied by a solo from a grumbling wife. If it were not for the relief I get from a little pleasant society of an evening I should cut my throat.’

‘I don’t think I shall be here to trouble you very much longer,’ said Lucy, looking at him with eyes that were slowly filling with tears. The look was pathetic, but the husband had seen it so often that it had lost its power to move him. ‘And if you don’t give any more thought to the poor children when I am gone than you do now, they won’t be very long a burden upon you, for with their weakly constitutions they need all a father’s care.’

‘They need a father’s purse, my girl, and mine’s empty,’ answered Green, putting away his pipe and rising to depart.

He settled his collar, and arranged his hair before the shabby little glass over the mantelpiece ; and then, feeling that he had not been quite so kind as he might have been to the weak piece of humanity which he had wedded, he bent down and gave his wife a gentle pat on the shoulder with one hand, while he offered the forefinger of the other to his baby, who clutched at it convulsively and examined it with a frowning intentness, as if the paternal finger were a natural curiosity seen for the first time.

‘Cheer up, old girl,’ said Green ; ‘a creaking door always hangs longest on its hinges. You’ll go on creaking for many a year to come, I’ll be bound.’

‘I don’t think so, Charley. My chest’s awfully bad, and the pain in my side gets worse every day.’

‘It’s all on account of these villainous east winds. You’ll pick up directly there’s a change in the weather. Ta ta.’

‘Where are you going, Churchill, in such a hurry?’

‘To the station. There’s a concert at Blackford

this evening, and a new contralto I've set my heart on hearing. I shall go third class. Three bob there and back, and I shall be home before one in the morning. Don't sit up for me, Lucy; but just have a bit of something hot on the kitchen hob, as per usual.'

He was gone before she could remonstrate. She sat rocking the baby on her knees, while a few slow tears rolled down her wasted cheeks.

'Three shillings for railway fare, and something for his tea at Blackford, even if he gets into the concert all for nothing,' she murmured dolefully. 'Five shillings would buy Mattie a pair of boots, and the poor child's feet are on the ground. God help me, I was so proud of Churchill's musical genius when I married him; and now I hate the name of concerts, and organs, and oratorios, and the whole lot of it.'

The bell hanging on the shop door gave a jingling ring, and Lucy Green started up in an agitated manner, hurriedly deposited the flabby bundle of infant life in the cradle, and hastened into the shop. A gentleman was standing in front of the counter, looking about him thoughtfully.

'Did you wish to see our newest music, sir?'

asked Mrs. Green, summoning up her most cheerful smile, and trying to look like a prosperous tradesman's wife, painfully conscious all the while of her faded gown and untidy hair, which the baby had been clawing a few minutes ago.

'I am not a customer, madam,' answered the stranger with grave politeness. 'I wish to have a little private conversation with you, if you will allow me. I believe you are Mrs. Green?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I am known—slightly—to your relation Mrs. Dawley, of Holbrook Farm.'

'Indeed, sir. Then I'm sure you're welcome,' exclaimed Lucy, brightening. 'Mrs. Dawley is my aunt, and the best of aunts. How was she looking, sir, when you last saw her?'

'Glorious. I met her in Highclere market-place only a week ago, and she looked blooming and hearty.'

'Dear old Highclere,' said Mrs. Green regretfully. 'How I love that place! It isn't as fashionable or as handsome a town as this, I know, but it's nearer my old home, and I knew it when I was a light-hearted girl, without a care. That makes the

difference, you see, sir. Will you please to step into the parlour, sir, and make yourself at home? It's a poor place, for we're limited as to room, you see, everything being sacrificed to the shop, and with children about one can never keep a room tidy.'

'Pray don't apologize,' said Morton Blake. 'I dare say you would rather have disorder with the children, than order without them.'

'Yes, indeed, sir, I should be sorry to lose one, though it's a wearing life.'

Her hollow cough gave emphasis to the remark. It was a life that seemed likely to wear into death before she was much older.

'I want to talk to you about the past, when you were in service at Templewood.'

'Ah, sir, those were the happiest days of my life. Seeing me now, you'd never believe what a giddy, flighty young creature I was then. But what interest can that time have to you, sir?'

'A great deal. I am hunting up details of family history in order to work out a law case in which I am interested. You understand?'

'Not exactly, sir,' answered Mrs. Green with a

puzzled look ; 'but you must bear in mind that I've no head for business. Green is always telling me that.'

Morton had invented this pretext as he came along, feeling that it would be necessary to allege some motive for his inquiries.

'You were with Miss Alice Rothney before her marriage, I believe ?' he said.

'Yes, sir, I was own maid to Miss Alice and her sisters. Ah, she was a sweet young lady, poor flower, cut off in her bloom and beauty.'

Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away her head with a choking sob as she felt in her pocket for her handkerchief, fumbling nervously in her agitation.

'You were very fond of her, I see,' said Morton kindly.

'Fond of her! I loved her as if she had been my own flesh and blood. She was a kind mistress to me, and I was true and faithful to her. Yes, God knows I would have gone through fire and water to serve her!'

'Was she happy in her married life?' asked Morton, intensely interested.

It seemed to him that he was on the right track. Mrs. Green was inclined to be communicative. The floodgates of memory were open, and all would be easy. But at this question she became suddenly on her guard. She drew herself up, tightened her lips, dried her tears, and became as it were a woman of marble.

‘She had the best of husbands, sir, and the most devoted.’

‘But that does not always ensure happiness. She may have had a previous attachment. She may have been unhappy in her memory of a former lover.’

‘If it were so, sir, it wouldn’t be my place to talk about it, especially with a stranger. I was true to my lady in life, and I wish to be true to her in death.’

‘I would not for the world assail your fidelity. But there is a reason why the details of Lady Courtenay’s married life and of her death are deeply interesting to me. It is no idle curiosity that moves me. Be assured of that. It is in the cause of truth and justice that I ask these questions.’

Lucy Green looked at him with a scared expression, pale to the lips.

‘You, from your association with the neighbour-

hood, must have been interested in the trial at Highclere last December,' continued Morton. 'Tell me frankly, now, do you think the man who was condemned for the murder of Walter Blake was the real murderer?'

She never took her eyes from his face. The pale lips assumed a purple tinge, the hectic flush came and went upon the sunken cheeks.

'This woman is in the secret,' thought Morton.

'What strange questions you ask!' she faltered; 'and what could that man's guilt or innocence have to do with Lady Courtenay?'

'Perhaps a great deal. Walter Blake had been Lady Courtenay's suitor before her marriage. It is possible that a husband's jealousy——'

'You have no right to say such things. You have no right to speak against the dead,' exclaimed Lucy, tremulous with anger. 'I was true to my lady while she was alive. Do you think I am going to be false to her now to gratify your malice? Why do you come here to rip up the secrets of the past?—if there were any secrets in her life—which there were not. Nobody ever slandered her while she was alive.'

Is she to be made light of after she has been lying in her grave twenty years?’

‘Pray do not agitate yourself,’ said Morton gently. ‘I have not said a word against Lady Courtenay. If Walter Blake loved her, it is a reason why I should honour her memory. But I believe that Sir Everard Courtenay had a hand in Walter Blake’s murder, and I believe that you could help me to discover the secret of his guilt.’

‘Sir Everard Courtenay!’ cried Lucy, with a laugh that had too hysterical a sound for genuine mirthfulness or genuine scorn. ‘Why, he and Mr. Blake were old friends—old schoolfellows. Mr. Blake was as much at home at Fairview as Sir Everard himself.’

‘What if that friendship was suddenly broken—if some act or word, innocent of all evil, perhaps—on the part of the wife awakened the husband’s jealousy—’

‘Oh, you are leading me on now about Sir Everard, as you led me on about Lady Courtenay. But you are wasting time and trouble. I have no secrets to tell, and if I had I would not speak one word against a good master, who was always kind and generous to me—yes, always generous,’ she

repeated, lapsing from hysterical laughter to hysterical tears. 'He has been a good friend to me in my trouble; with four children, and a husband who squanders more than he earns, what would become of me, do you think, if I hadn't a friend? and yet you, a stranger to me, come here and try to make me turn against him.'

She had risen in her agitation and had moved about the room, stooping over the cradle to arrange the baby's coverlet, with a wan hand that fluttered like a withered leaf in the faint evening wind. Morton had risen too, and had changed his place, so that he now stood with his face turned to the bright winter light, streaming through a window that looked northward.

'Why do you distress yourself, Mrs. Green?' he said, watching her intently. 'If there is nothing to conceal, or nothing to tell, what need of this agitation? But if you are keeping the secret of a crime—bribed perhaps to be silent—you are doing a wicked act, and no good can come to you or your children from the help which is given you as hush-money.'

'How dare you tell me I take hush-money?' she cried, trembling in every limb, and looking him

straight in the face for the first time since they had shifted their position. 'How dare you insult——'

She stopped suddenly, with a faint shriek, and clasped her hands before her eyes, as if to shut him from her sight.

'My God,' she cried, 'Walter Blake's face!'

She sank into the nearest chair, cowering and shuddering as if she had seen a ghost.

'Oh, my poor Miss Alice, my poor Miss Alice! He was so good and brave and true, and loved herso dearly.'

Then she began to sob, big tears rolling down her wasted cheeks.

'Why do you come here to torment me, like a spirit from the dead?' she cried. 'You have no right to torture me like this.'

'Yes, I have the right to use every means in my power to search out the secret of Walter Blake's murder,' answered Morton sternly, 'for he was my father.'

She rose again and came over to him, and looked him in the face earnestly, with piteous eyes, as if indeed he were a shadowy wanderer from the land where all things are forgotten.

‘Yes, it is his face,’ she murmured. ‘I ought to have known it from the first. But I hardly saw you till just now. You sat with your back to the light, and I was so upset by what you said—and my sight has grown weaker every day since I’ve nursed my last baby. I ought to have guessed who you were at once. Your voice is like his, too—perhaps that’s the reason I was so upset—for I’m a poor nervous creature.’

‘Can you help me to bring his guilt home to my father’s murderer?’ asked Morton, waving away all her agitated protestations with a tone and look that indicated intentness of purpose.

‘No. What should I know of the murder? I was with my poor dying mistress all that day. I never stirred outside Fairview—I hardly left her room.’

‘And you know nothing—you can recall no suspicious circumstance? You can give me no clue?’

‘Nothing—no—no.’

‘You mean you will not.’

‘No, I say I cannot—I know nothing. Why do you not believe what all the world believes—that

the man who confessed to the crime was the man who did it ?’

‘Because I have the strongest reasons for thinking otherwise—yes, good and sufficient ground for believing that Sir Everard’s was the hand that struck the blow.’

‘You must be mad,’ said Lucy, with her gaze still fixed on his face, as if drawn to it irresistibly by some influence of memory, love, or fear, stronger than her will. ‘Sir Everard, a gentleman, lift his hand against his own friend ! Impossible. Ah, Mr. Blake, Mr. Blake, why did you come here ? My poor heart, how it beats ! and the blood seems seething and bubbling in my poor weak head. Why do you bring up the past ? I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it.’

She flung herself back into the chair, from which she had risen restlessly a minute before, and burst into passionate tears. Never had Morton seen a woman sob so bitterly, and the sight wrung his heart.

‘My good soul, I am truly sorry,’ he exclaimed, laying his hand gently, almost tenderly, upon her shoulder. ‘Pray do not distress yourself in this way. If you have no knowledge of my father’s

death, if you are withholding nothing from me, there can be no cause for this agitation.'

'Yes, there can,' she cried passionately. 'There is another cause. Cannot you understand? How dull you are! I knew your father so well, I saw him so often, when he came to Templewood courting Miss Alice. Oh, my God, his face rises before me now, as if it was only yesterday that he was standing by the holly hedge which shut off the kitchen-garden from the shrubbery, talking to me about my young mistress. He used to make a friend of me, and give me messages and little notes for her, for she was hardly out of the nursery at that time, and Lady George kept her very close. It used to please Mr. Blake to talk to me about her, for I could tell him all she said about him, and what he called her pretty ways. Of course it never occurred to him that any harm could come to *me* from all this talk. You fine gentlemen think that because we are servants we are not flesh and blood, that we have no hearts to feel, or fancies to be led astray. But though I was a lady's-maid I was a woman, and I grew to care more for him than I ought to have cared, and I was

miserable about him, and took no pleasure in life except when he was near me, and my heart was gnawed with jealousy; and many a time when he has given me a letter for Miss Alice I have covered it with kisses, and carried it about in my bosom for hours before I gave it to her, and I've been tempted to destroy it in my jealous pain. Yet I was true to my lady through all, and never turned against her, or wavered in my love for her.'

She said all this with her wasted hands spread before her wasted face, her speech broken every now and then by a stifled sob. Now she let fall her hands, and looked at Morton once more, her face crimson with shame.

'Why do I tell you this now that he has been in his grave twenty years?' she asked. 'Heaven knows why. I have never told a creature before to-day; he never guessed it. I was not a bold, flirting girl, like some, and I would have died rather than betray myself to him. But you are his son. It seems to me almost as if you were himself, risen from the dead. And you wanted to know why I was so upset, and I have told you, and there's an end of it.'

This was said with an air that was half weary, half defiant. The air of one who was very tired of the burden of this life, and destined very soon to cast off that burden for ever.

‘I am sorry for you with all my soul,’ said Morton. ‘I honour you for having loved him, and for having so faithfully kept the secret of that love. You can the better understand how I, his only son, who loved him passionately, am bent upon avenging his death.’

This renewed her tears.

‘Don’t talk to me about his death,’ she pleaded. ‘I can’t bear it.’

He stood looking down at her thoughtfully for some minutes, while she sat struggling with her tears, and wiping them off her wan cheeks, sorely inclined to be hysterical, but conquering her agitation heroically. He felt profound pity for her weakness, physical and mental. He saw such signs of disease in her pallid face and shrunken form as could but move him to compassion. Yet he felt that, weak as she was, she had got the better of him, conquering his strength of will by her very weakness. He felt assured that she

had some knowledge of circumstances bearing on his father's death, and that she was wilfully keeping that knowledge from him. Throughout the interview there had been a remorseful consciousness of wrongdoing in her manner. It was not grief for the dead alone which drew from her such passionate tokens of distress. There was guilt as well.

‘You seem to be in a weak state of health,’ he said kindly, when she had grown calmer and had taken the baby from his cradle, as if in the hope of finding some comfort in that feeble morsel of humanity, which she pressed tenderly to her breast, bending down to kiss the flabby little face, smiling into the blue eyes that stared wonderingly at her.

‘Yes, I have had a hacking cough ever since last September, and I have been very low. Poor mother died in a decline, and my eldest sister went off last year just in the same way, and I suppose it will be my turn next. I shouldn’t much mind if it wasn’t for these poor children; but it’s hard to leave them. Churchill means well, poor fellow; but he’s wrapt up in music, and singing, and such like. He’ll go twenty miles to hear a new church organ, or a new

singer. He can't take care of the children as I do.'

'Please God you may be spared for some years yet. You seem to have rather a hard life here. The shop to mind——'

'Churchill is at home sometimes,' answered the wife with a deprecating air, 'but I do mind the shop mostly.'

'And the children to take care of——'

'Yes, it is a hard life to any one that's out of health,' assented Lucy with a sigh.

'Don't you think if you were to come into the fresh country air, among fields and woods, and have a comfortable cottage to live in, and a nice little servant to look after the children and wait upon you, you might get better?'

'Lor', sir, you might as well ask me if I thought I should get better in Paradise! Of course I should, but it's impossible.'

'Not at all. If you like to come to Tangley I'll give you one of the cottages on my estate, with a nice bit of garden, and I'll find an honest girl to nurse you and your children; and my aunt, who is

about the best woman in the world, will take care that you want for nothing, till you get well and strong and are able to come back to your husband.'

'Oh, sir,' she said, clasping her hands rapturously, 'how generous and noble you are! Yes, you are indeed his son—like him who was the kindest of men.'

'Let it be a settled thing then. I will have some furniture put into a cottage to-morrow—we have always plenty of chairs and tables and old bedsteads in the lumber-room at the manor,—and I will get my aunt to arrange everything. All you have to do is to get your husband's consent to your leaving him to take care of himself for a month or two.'

'I don't think he'll much mind, sir,' answered Lucy. 'He has often said he would like to give me a change of air if he could afford it, and it worries him, poor fellow, to hear my cough, and to know he can do nothing towards curing it. He has grumbled at my aunt Dawley because she hasn't asked me to go and stay at the farm; but then you see, sir, my aunt has her husband to study, and sick people are bad company. And even if she were to invite me to

the farm she wouldn't have the children, and I should have to be parted from them, poor innocents.'

'You will be happier with your children round you, I am sure. Here is a trifle for the expenses of the journey.' He slipped a five-pound note into her hand. 'I'll write to you to-morrow to say how soon the cottage can be ready; and you can settle everything with Mr. Green in the meantime.'

'Oh, sir, I don't know how to thank you. You are too good. You are like your father. I can't say more than that.'

'I don't want any thanks. Good-bye, until I see you at Tangley;' and with this brief leave-taking Morton took up his hat and departed.

There had been no thought of self-interest in his kindness to Lucy. His heart had been touched by her distress, and still more so by the deep feeling she had shown in reference to his father. But after he had left her, and was on his way home, it occurred to him that whatever knowledge she had withheld from him to-day as a stranger, she might possibly impart at some future time, when she had learnt to regard him as her benefactor and friend.

CHAPTER IX.

SHAFTO JEBB IS SENT FOR.

JANE BARNARD went back to Highclere sorely depressed by the failure of her mission. Her chief hope had been in the counsel who had defended her father, and whose defence had hinted at a knowledge of suspicious facts bearing on the murder. To find him as ignorant as herself was a sore disappointment.

Her next endeavour must be to discover whether Shafto Jebb, who had furnished the hint on which Mr. Tomplin had framed his cross-examination of Sir Everard Courtenay, knew any more than he had pretended to know that evening in the coffee-room at the 'Peacock.' A man of that kind might know a good deal, and, in his self-importance, hint at secrets which he dared not betray, lest in so doing he should hazard his professional position. Or he might know nothing, and from sheer boastfulness pretend to the possession of some terrible secret.

‘There was an old Dr. Jebb at Austhorpe that poor mother used to go to for medicine,’ reflected Jane. ‘I wonder whether this one is his son? I might go and see him about the pain in my shoulder.’

She went to bed that night in very low spirits. This business of clearing her father’s name, which she had undertaken with so much energy and determination, began to seem hopeless. The poor old father was lying in Portland prison, a condemned murderer. Pentonville and Millbank had both been full at the time of his respite, so he had been drafted straight to Portland. The mystery of Walter Blake’s death was explained to the satisfaction of everybody. How was she, a friendless woman, to induce the world to reverse the sentence that had been passed upon a self-accused criminal?

And now, being an economical little woman, Mrs. Barnard began to worry herself about the money she was wasting upon this seemingly hopeless enterprise. She had spent thirty pounds already out of the fifty which her husband had given her when she left home. She had crossed in a Cunard steamer in the hope of being in time for the trial; but she had

insisted, much against her husband's wish, on coming as a second-class passenger.

'It'll be comfortable enough for me,' she said when he remonstrated with her. 'I don't mind roughing it. I came over in an emigrant ship, you know, dear, and was seven weeks on the sea. What should I do among a lot of simpering saloon passengers, thinking of nothing but eating and drinking and dressing? I'd rather be among homely people who have got their troubles, and are obliged to be careful of their money.'

The same desire to spare her husband's purse had influenced Mrs. Barnard in her choice of the second-floor bedroom over a tobacconist's, in one of the narrowest streets in Highclere. For this attic chamber, which was neat and clean and airy, she gave the large sum of four shillings a week, in which rent was included the right to boil her kettle or cook a chop, or a steak, or a rasher on the kitchen fire. She lived as such unselfish women can live, on tea and bread and butter, with such inexpensive relishes or substitutes for dinner as her fancy suggested. At this rate of expenditure the twenty pounds in hand

would last a long time. Yet Jane Barnard had an uneasy sense of wasting her husband's hard-earned money, and she had already asked her landlady to try to get her some plain needlework to do.

Disheartened as she was by the result of her journey to London, she wrote to her husband in a hopeful strain, lest he too should lose heart and insist on her immediate return. He had been opposed to her coming, and it had been only her intense desire that had prevailed over his dislike to the journey. To own herself baffled and beaten would be too painful to Jane Barnard's proud spirit; for this little woman, who had been reared and educated in a workhouse, and had graduated in the rough school of domestic service, was gifted with an indomitable spirit, and a mind not to be ruled by time or space.

About a week after her interview with Mr. Tomplin, she walked over to Austhorpe one mild gray afternoon, passing with a shudder by the pollard oak, and Blatchmardean copse.

Austhorpe looked the quietest place in the universe on this winter afternoon. The south-west

wind had breathed across the frosty fields, and melted the snow of last week, save here and there where it lay white under a hedge, or on a northward-facing bank. The scattered cottages, set far apart on the wide high road leading to nowhere, stood out sharply against the sunless afternoon sky. The old church stood afar off among its tombstones, surrounded with level meadows, where the cattle grazed complacently, unconscious of any ecclesiastical influence.

Before inquiring for Mr. Jebb's surgery, Mrs. Barnard went to look at Fairview, the one important house in the village. The lodge gate was shut, so she walked along the path by the park paling which bounded the grounds, to get a glimpse at the mansion as she best might. It was so shut in by a fine belt of timber that she had to walk a good way before she came to the point at which the house was visible from the road. Then, looking at the old Tudor mansion through a break in the trees, Jane Barnard saw all the windows closely shuttered, as if the house were empty. The sight moved her curiously. Did it mean absence—or

death? She was so eager to know this, that she ran back to the lodge entrance as fast as her feet could carry her. She rang the bell, and was answered, after an interval of some minutes, by a lodge keeper, who looked indignant at being disturbed in his afternoon nap.

‘Are the family away?’ she asked.

‘Yes. You ought to know that by the look o’ the place, and not come startling folks, pulling that there bell like mad. What do you want?’

‘I wished to see Sir Everard Courtenay.’

‘Well, you’re just three days too late. Sir Everard and Miss Courtenay left three days ago for the south of France, and maybe they’re going to Alljeers.’

‘Wasn’t it very sudden?’

‘Well, it was sudden, if you must needs know. Sir Everard went away for his health. Our winter is too cold for him. Perhaps you’d better go up to the house and state your business to the house-keeper, and she’ll let Sir Everard know about it when she sends him his letters, if it’s anything particular.’

‘No, it’s not very particular. I’ll wait till he comes home. Does he go abroad every winter?’

‘He has been away travelling of an autumn pretty often. But this is the first winter he has gone abroad.’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Jane, whereupon the man stared at her through the rails of the gate, gave her a surly nod, and went back to finish his nap.

‘This looks like running away,’ thought Mrs. Barnard. ‘Why should he go abroad this winter above every other winter? I wonder whether it was Mr. Jebb who recommended him to go on account of his health?’

She now set herself to discover the village surgeon’s abode. It was in a lane that ran at right angles with the broad village street, not far from the Three Sugar-Loaves, and within the shadow of school-house and church. It was not a bad old house, but it had been sorely neglected for the last half-century. In its palmy days it had been the habitation of a prosperous farmer; but with the advance of enlightenment the farmer had taken it into his head that the old Homestead was not good enough for him, and had built himself

a lordly dwelling-house in a better situation, whereupon the Homestead had been rented by old Dr. Jebb, and from that time forward had sunk gradually to decay. All that Dr. Jebb's profession had ever done for him had been to feed and clothe himself and his numerous offspring, until those fledgelings were old enough to be flung out of the family nest, and pick up their own subsistence in the highways and byways of life. On the death of the original Jebb—who, without having taken the superior degree, had been always called doctor—his practice had descended to his eldest son, together with the household furniture, and the pestles, mortars and gallipots in the surgery; and on the strength of this inheritance the jovial Shafto had married, and filled the shabby, worn-out old house with a progeny as numerous as the previous generation which had occupied it. He was a man who took life lightly and though Mrs. Jebb had aspirations after better things, in the shape of paint and paper, curtains and carpets, the surgeon opined that what had been good enough for his father and mother was good enough for him : a comforting doctrine to a man who

never had any spare cash wherewith to improve and embellish his surroundings.

‘It’s very dreadful,’ sighed poor Mrs. Jebb. ‘The rain comes in through the nursery ceiling to such an extent that I expect to get up some morning and find those poor children drowned in their beds. I always have to put an umbrella up over Percy’s crib in stormy weather; and as for the stable, the roof is in such a weak state that I do believe it will tumble down and bury the gray mare some day, while you’re out of the way.’

‘The stable does want a little repair, certainly,’ said Shafto, who was more careful of the mare than of his children. He expected them to grow and thrive, as he had grown and thriven, like the birds of the air.

The house had a certain air of homely comfort, in spite of its shabbiness and dilapidation. The Jebbs lived on the fat of the land, and kept good fires, and were altogether inclined to take life pleasantly. They were hospitable to a ridiculous degree—in the idea of their less liberal

neighbours, the Uphams, for instance, who entertained their friends with a formal dinner two or three times a year, and never gave meat or drink to anybody between whiles. Mrs. Jebb was a meek, motherly woman, who was always cooking when she was not mending, and who considered Shafto one of the greatest men of his age, on an intellectual level with Gladstone and Disraeli, only Fate had hindered his coming to the front. She was too meek of spirit to give utterance to this opinion to any one except her own children; but to them she asserted the fact dogmatically.

‘If your father had only had an opening, he would have been Prime Minister before now,’ she told them.

Meek as Mrs. Jebb was, she was frequently involved in difficulties and discordances with her servants. She could only afford to keep two, and there was a great deal of work to be done by these two. Perhaps that difficulty might have been got over if Mrs. Jebb had not helped them. Her assistance turned the scale, and made war where peace might have been. It is

a fact in domestic history, that servants never stay long in a house where the mistress helps in the work. Essayists of the male sex may write fiercely against the fashionable lady who reads a novel when she might be washing the breakfast-things; or who gads about to afternoon tea drinkings when she should be helping to cook the dinner. The fact remains, that the only households of whose machinery the wheels go round smoothly, are the houses in which the mistress interferes in no overt manner with the duties of her servants.

Mrs. Jebb helped the domestics from morning till night, and in so doing she was continually behind the scenes, and saw a great many things which it would have been better for her to have left unseen, and deprived her servants of those stray scraps of liberty and leisure which would have sweetened toil and bondage: the hour loitered away at the shifty dinner, with such comfortable gossip and idle laughter as make the best sauce to cold mutton; the half-hour at tea, with elbows on table, and saucer balanced on out-

spread hand ; the friendly dropping in of sister or cousin ; the love-letter written before supper ;— Mrs. Jebb's servants found no such leisure moments or unobserved pleasures in their lives ; and after two or three months' drudgery they discovered that the work was too heavy for them, and gave their mistress warning ; at which Mrs. Jebb, although she was accustomed to the calamity, usually shed tears, and declared that she couldn't have believed this last Ann, or Jane, or Mary, would have turned out as ungrateful as the rest.

'The fact is, you're too kind to them,' said Shafto. 'You pamper and pet them till they don't know what they're doing. Why, it was only last summer I saw them eating cold salmon.'

'It was only the tail and the fins, Shafto. I made salmon cutlets of all the fish that was left, for your breakfast.'

'And very good those cutlets are,' said the surgeon. 'I think you fry fish better and better every day.'

'I take a pleasure in it,' answered Mrs. Jebb, with mild delight at her husband's compliment.

On this January afternoon, when Jane Barnard came to the Homestead, Mrs. Jebb was in her usual difficulty. Sarah, her nurse and confidential servant, had given warning, and the warning was to expire in a few days, yet Mrs. Jebb had found no substitute for the deserter.

‘Don’t throw out your dirty water before you’re sure of clean,’ said Shafto, who was fond of proverbs and aphorisms; but the dirty water had a will of its own, and had made up its mind to go, and there was no clean water forthcoming.

Emily Jebb had shed some furtive tears this afternoon, while she busied herself with the composition of a curry, a dish which her husband loved. He had his own views and theories as to the concoction of this savoury meat—he made his own curry-powder, and believed that he had discovered a mixture superior to anything that had ever been achieved by the Rajahs of Ind.

Mrs. Barnard knocked modestly at the surgery door, feeling that she had no right to approach the parish surgeon in his domestic character; but Mr. Jebb was miles away on his afternoon round, and

the door was opened by his eldest daughter, a tall slip of a girl, in very short petticoats, who had been lying on the surgery rug, reading 'Robinson Crusoe.'

'Pa's not at home,' she said curtly. 'Ma is, if you want to see her. You haven't come about the nurse's place, have you?'

'No, miss. I wanted to consult your father about my health.'

'Pa will be at home to his dinner at six—we have tea and pa has dinner,' interjected Miss Jebb, who was of a communicative temper, and had an abrupt and somewhat breathless way of speaking. 'I thought you might have come after the nurse's situation.'

Mrs. Barnard looked thoughtful. She saw a possible opportunity in this suggestion.

'Is Mrs. Jebb in want of a nurse?' she asked.

'Yes, we want one dreadfully,' answered the eager girl, with youthful candour. 'Sally has behaved most ungratefully. We liked her so much, you know, and we were very good with her, except Ethie. Ethie has a bad temper, you know—she has

broken chilblains, and ma says that's the reason—and Sally gave ma warning one day, all of a sudden, and she's going the day after to-morrow, and I shall have to nurse the baby and keep all the others quiet till we get a new nurse, and I hate the thought of it. Perhaps you know of some one who might suit ma?' speculated the damsel, staring at Mrs. Barnard with big round eyes.

'I think I do know of some one who might suit, for a short time, at any rate. Could I see your mamma?'

'Ma's busy in the kitchen, and I know she's doing something very particular,' answered Florence Jebb, to whose mind her father's dinner was among the leading facts in life, 'but I think she'd see you. Please come into the breakfast-room.'

The damsel left Robinson Crusoe sprawling wide open on the hearth-rug, in company with a lively kitten and a disabled doll, and led the way up a little stair into the breakfast-room.

It was breakfast-room, dinner, tea, and supper-room too, and smelt strongly of meals; but there was a cheery fire in the old-fashioned grate, there was

a bright little copper kettle singing on the hob, there was a roomy, luxurious easy chair beside the fire ready for the surgeon, whose slippers lay in a snug corner close by. Altogether the room, shabby as it was, had a comfortable look, and even the sleek tabby cat stretched before the fire suggested the placid ease of home.

Here Mrs. Barnard waited while Miss Jebb went in quest of her mother.

‘If I were to take the nurse’s place for a month or so it would save me board and lodging, and I should be likely to hear all that Mr. Jebb had to tell,’ Jane said to herself; ‘and as to hard work, I don’t mind that a bit.’

Mrs. Jebb came in, flushed with the heat of the fire, and the anxiety of a true artist.

‘My daughter tells me you know of a nurse who might suit me,’ she said.

‘Yes, madam; I thought, if you wouldn’t mind taking a person for a short time, while you are looking about you, as one may say, I should be very glad of the situation myself. But I could hardly stay more than a month or six weeks. I

came over from America on business, and I shall have to go back to my house and family in about that time.'

'You seem a very respectable person, and—well—yes,' hesitated Mrs. Jebb, who, being of a procrastinating temper, had delayed looking for a new nurse till the old one was on the eve of departure, and now knew not where to find one. Yes, I think perhaps we might manage—it would be a convenience for a time—and I should be able to suit myself better if I had leisure to look about me. Are you an American?'

'No, ma'am; I went out to America when I was nineteen, and married and settled there.'

'Does your husband approve of your being away from him?'

'Yes, ma'am. At least he doesn't mind it, knowing that I had important business in England. My business is not finished yet, or I should go back to him. I might have to ask for a day, perhaps, once or twice, while I was in your service.'

'Oh, you could have that, of course. I am always glad to oblige my servants, if they are obliging to me. You understand children, I suppose?'

‘I was nursemaid before I was fifteen, ma’am ; and I have brought up my own dear children.’

Various questions followed, as to whether the applicant could do plain needlework, a little dress-making now and then, trim the children’s bonnets, was willing to make herself generally useful, and so on.

‘I can turn my hand to pretty well anything, ma’am, from trimming a bonnet to cooking a dinner ; but I must tell you that I can’t offer any reference, unless it is to the person in whose house I have lodged three weeks, and that’s not a long character. I’m quite a stranger in England.’

‘You look very respectable,’ said Mrs. Jebb meditatively. ‘I don’t think I should mind running the risk. But Mr. Jebb mustn’t know it. He’s so very particular.’

It is always well to hold up one member of the family as an embodied code of law, severe as that of Mede and Persian. Shafto Jebb was one of the easiest of men, save in matters of meat and drink ; but Mrs. Jebb had a diplomatic way

of talking of him as if he were a tyrant of unappeasable ferocity.

So it was settled that Mrs. Barnard should come to the Homestead with bag and baggage next evening, by which time Sarah the deserter would have gone forth to seek her fortune elsewhere, and the nursery would have been scrubbed and dusted in honour of the new-comer.

‘I hope you’ll take to the children,’ said Mrs. Jebb. ‘They’re rather self-willed, but they have warm, loving hearts.’

‘I’m not afraid, ma’am. I can always get on with children.’

‘You haven’t told me your name.’

‘Barnard, ma’am. Jane Barnard.’

Mrs. Barnard went back to Highclere, well pleased with her afternoon’s work. To live at Austhorpe, in domestic service, unobserved, unsuspected, as an unemployed stranger might be, would give her excellent opportunities of finding out much that she wanted to know. If there were any dark secret in the past life of Sir Everard Courtenay she would be likely to get

some inkling of it here, where his life had been spent, where he was the one important person in the place, and must needs have been always the object of closest scrutiny. Tangle, too, was very near, and she would be able to know what course Morton Blake was taking. Then, again, the idea of spending a few weeks near the place of her birth was pleasant to her, anxious as she was to accomplish her mission, and to go back to her husband and children. Thus it was with a cheerful spirit that she took up her abode in Mr. Jebb's household.

She found the habits of the surgeon's family peculiarly favourable to her object. The general usefulness to which she had pledged herself included waiting at table while Mr. Jebb dined; and as the jovial surgeon was loquacious at his meals, and was one of those reckless, blustering talkers who rarely pause to consider what heed the listeners may be taking of their talk, Jane Barnard was in a fair way to hear his real opinions upon all subjects.

It was Mr. Jebb's custom to dine surrounded by his olive-branches, every one of whom, down to the

cantankerous baby, he honestly loved; but this family gathering did not prevent the bread-winner dining daintily, and on exclusive fare. His little dinner was distinct and separate from the general meal. Wife and children dined at one o'clock; and for them the evening banquet was a compromise between tea and supper. Mrs. Jebb managed the tea-tray at one end of the table, while the other end was neatly set forth with Mr. Jebb's particular bottled ale, his plate of soup, his little bit of fish, his curry, or bird, or sweetbread to follow. He was a man who boasted that he wanted very little; and who frankly owned that he required that little to be of the best quality. Mrs. Jebb had made it the study of her life to satisfy her lord, and she had no haunting idea that her existence had been wasted because its chief occupation had been in the kitchen. The children made their evening meal of such savoury odds and ends as a careful housekeeper could afford to give them, eked out by bread and jam, a homely plum cake, of satisfying solidity, water-cresses, or the occasional shrimp.

‘What sort of a day have you had, Shafto?’

asked Mrs. Jebb, one February evening, when her lord had approved her last intellectual effort, in the shape of a filleted sole with mushroom sauce.

‘So, so. Sir Nathaniel sent for me this morning. The election has put him off his feed—too much excitement for an old one like him—though there’s plenty of pace in the old fellow yet. I gave him a ball and threw him out of work for a day or two.’

Shafto had a way of speaking of his patients as if they were horses, to which his wife and family were accustomed.

‘No talk of Sir Everard and Miss Courtenay’s return, I suppose?’ said Mrs. Jebb.

‘Not likely. If he went abroad for his health he ought not to come back till May.’

‘If he went for his health—why of course that was the reason he went, wasn’t it?’ asked Mrs. Jebb, her curiosity aroused by that significant ‘if.’

‘Well, I don’t know. One can’t always get at a man’s real meaning. The whole thing was so sudden. I never heard Sir Everard complain. He seemed dull and out of spirits sometimes, and was

fonder of sitting by the fire in his library poring over stupid old books than a healthy middle-aged man ought to be. But I never knew there was anything amiss with him. Yet I'm supposed to be the family doctor. And one fine morning he rushes up to London, sees a physician, and comes home and says he has been ordered to the south of Europe—or Algiers even—on account of his lungs. I call it an insult to his local adviser to act in such a way. But there's more behind it all than anybody knows.'

'What can there be?' asked Mrs. Jebb, leaning over her tea-tray and looking intently at her husband, as he coquetted with the last morsel of his sweetbread, and mopped up the gravy with a bit of bread.

'My dear, I'm not going to talk,' said Mr. Jebb; and then for once in a way he appeared to be conscious that the youthful mind is not a stranger to curiosity, for he glanced at the clustering heads of his household gathered about a dish of 'winkles,' and murmured, 'Little pitchers—you know, my dear.' The nurse was standing at the sideboard cutting bread and butter, and of her presence neither Mr.

Jebb nor his wife took any heed. As a stranger from the other side of the Atlantic she could have no possible interest in local gossip.

‘Tell me by-and-by, dear,’ said Mrs. Jebb meekly.

Whenever Shafto said he was not going to talk, it was a sure sign that he was longing to impart his ideas to a sympathetic mind.

Mrs. Jebb occupied herself in filling the cups which her children thrust into the tea-tray, each clamorous to have his or her claim allowed.

‘I’ve only had one cup, ma,’ remonstrated Florence. ‘Percy has had two; and I believe Algie has had three.’

‘That’s another of Flo’s crumpers,’ cried Algernon, with his mouth full, and his chin anointed with jam, like a classical comedian smeared with the lees of wine. ‘What do you expect will happen to you if you tell such out-and-outers as that?’

‘If I stuffed myself with strawberry jam on the top of winks to the extent you do, I should expect to have a fit,’ retorted Florence.

Jane Barnard laid a soothing hand on Flo’s

sharp shoulder, and offered her a tempting crust from the new loaf.

‘You’re disturbing your pa and ma, dear,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll take care you get a good cup of tea.’

Mrs. Barnard had been at the Homestead three weeks, and had already acquired a great influence over the children, who were not altogether bad children, although they had been dragged up anyhow, and were scampish in their ideas and behaviour.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ volunteered Mr. Jebb, leaning back in his chair and picking his teeth in a leisurely manner, as if it were the next best thing to dining. ‘I don’t mind going so far as to say that a certain marriage will never come off.’

‘What marriage?’

‘How dull you are, Emily! M. B. and D. C., of course.’

‘What, Dulcie? Dulcie not marry Morton?’ cried Mrs. Jebb. ‘Why, it would break both of their hearts. I’ve seen them together times and often, you know, Shafto, for she always asks me

to tea when I call upon her, and she always returns my call. And though it's a great effort to put on one's best gown and bonnet and go out like a lady to pay a visit, I like to do it now and then, because it reminds me that I *am* a lady, however I may slave at the housework.'

'I call it fiddle-faddle,' interjected the surgeon contemptuously. 'If you go out you should go for a good country walk. That would freshen you up a bit.'

'Not half so much as a nice cup of tea and a little friendly talk in Miss Courtenay's pretty morning-room. Everything is so elegant there—the books, the china, the furniture. I feel as if I were in a new world. And oh, Shafto, I'm sure they adore each other; and if the marriage were to be broken off I believe it would be the death of her.'

'“Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love,”' quoted Shafto, who had picked up a score or so of Shakespearian saws from other people, and passed for a Shakespearian scholar without ever having read so much as a single scene in a single play. 'I should be very sorry if the young

lady were to fret. I vaccinated her, and I've attended her ever since Sir Everard brought her back to Fairview—measles, scarlatina, chicken-pox, whooping-cough—I've brought her through them all beautifully,—so you can't suppose I'm not interested in her welfare. Still I say that marriage will never come off. There's an antagonism between the two men, Sir E. and M. B. They may smother it for a time, but sooner or later it will break out in a big blaze, like a fire that has been ever so long smouldering. I saw M.'s face the day of the trial—saw him watch Sir E. while the prisoner's counsel was cross-examining him, and there was mischief in it. Yes, Mrs. Jebb, there was mischief. That marriage will never come off, or if it does there'll be misery for somebody. I've seen what domestic misery means—silent—secret. A beautiful home—every luxury that wealth can buy—a position in the county—youth—beauty—pride of race. But the trail of the serpent was over it all. That's where it is, Mrs. Jebb. The trail was there—the slimy, silvery track that showed where the snake had been.'

The cook, an unusual apparition in that room,

burst suddenly in, breathless, her cap half blown off her head.

‘Please, sir, you are to go to Tangley Manor directly minute. Mr. Blake’s took ill, and the ladies think it’s brain fever.’

‘Didn’t I say so?’ exclaimed Mr. Jebb, looking at his wife with an air of gloomy triumph, as he put his toothpick in his pocket and rose to go.

And although he had said nothing of the kind, Mrs. Jebb looked upon him as a prophet.

CHAPTER X.

WAS LIFE WORTH LIVING ?

MORTON BLAKE had told himself that it was best that he and Dulcie should be parted. He had made up his mind long ago that his chief duty in life was to avenge his father's death. The bringing home of his murdered father's body, that father from whom he had parted so blithely at the lodge gate in the gray autumn morning; the father whose strong arms had lifted him in front of the saddle for a few minutes' trot on the stout hunter; the father against whose broad chest his childish cheek had been lovingly laid for a parting hug before the firm, strong hand dropped him lightly upon the turf beside the open gate. The child, awakened by the confusion and horror of the household, had run down in his night-shirt, barefooted, to the hall, in time to see the corpse brought across the threshold. The impression made by that awful scene upon a mind naturally

intense and concentrative had become a part of the boy's being, and had strengthened as the years went by.

Thus it was that from the moment dark doubts of Sir Everard Courtenay entered his mind, Morton had been unhappy in his relations with Dulcie ; loving her with his heart and soul, yet feeling that to his love he was sacrificing duty. He had tried to stifle his doubts. He had prayed that he might become blind, rather than make any discovery which should alienate him from the girl he loved.

But her father had taken the initiative, and the tie which the lover could not have broken was sundered. He remembered now how strongly Sir Everard had opposed his suit in the first instance, and how he had only yielded when he saw that to be inflexible might be to break his daughter's heart. Was not this opposition, for which there was no ground in the social position or moral character of the lover, another link in the chain of evidence which Morton had been putting together, reluctantly, despairingly, knowing that the destruction of his own happiness must be the result, if that horrible

suspicion which had slowly gathered strength in his mind should prove true ?

He had told himself that it was a good thing for his engagement to Dulcie to be broken ; but he had not known how deeply his love for her was rooted in his heart, or how empty of all delight his life would be without her. He had borne their temporary separation better than he had supposed he could have done ; simply because the work and excitement of the election had left him no time for thought. But now that the election was over, and that he had resigned himself to a life-long severance from Dulcie, he found how hard it was to exist without her. For some weeks after his interview with Lucy Green he lived as in a dreary dream, keeping himself aloof from his family, shutting himself in his study on pretence of business, and taking long, lonely walks after dark, when he was sure of meeting no one who knew him, and thus could avoid all that friendly every-day talk which jars so painfully upon a mind given over to one all-absorbing grief.

And now the natural result of such a life had overtaken him, and he was prostrate with a fever

which was rather mental than physical, and which sorely puzzled that rough-and-ready practitioner, Mr. Shafto Jebb, though he was careful to conceal his perplexity from the anxious women at Tangley Manor. Morton had told no one that his engagement with Dulcie was ended. He had shrunk from the idea of being pitied and sympathized with, as he would have shrunk from physical torture. But his aunt shrewdly suspected the cause of his depression. She had of late observed that the post-bag had brought no letters from Dulcie, nor conveyed Morton's customary budget for the foreign post. There was something wrong, evidently, thought tender-hearted Dora Blake; but when she tried, in the gentlest way, to approach the subject, Morton met her inquiries with such gloomy reserve that she dared not go further.

Prolonged sleeplessness, over-exertion in all kinds of bad weather, and an utter distaste for food, had brought him to such a state of weakness that he lay like a log; sometimes remaining for hours silent, apathetic, inert; at other times wildly delirious. The brain was evidently affected, but to what extent

Shafto Jebb could not discover. Insomnia was the most difficult feature of the disease. Want of appetite might be overcome by the forcible administration of nourishment; but no opiate that Mr. Jebb tried could give sleep. Laudanum, morphia, and chloral were given vainly, or worse than vainly, for they excited and stimulated the brain which they were intended to soothe.

Dora Blake begged that a London physician, one of the most famous in the land, might be sent for; and Mr. Jebb consented to be enlightened by the highest scientific authority; but when the great authority appeared he had very little to communicate in return for his large fee. He assured Miss Blake that Mr. Jebb had been treating the patient with the utmost discretion. The chloral had been perhaps tried a little too persistently, seeing that the effect had been injurious rather than beneficial. The patient's mind had evidently been greatly distressed. There had been some disturbing cause at work, possibly for some time. Perfect repose was absolutely necessary: and the patient's constitution, which had sunk to a very low point under the

mental strain, must be built up again. The great authority made a strong point of this rebuilding of the constitution. The issue of the case would depend upon care and nursing rather than upon active medical treatment, he said. From what he had the pleasure of knowing of Mr. Jebb—he had never heard of the man's existence until the previous day—he was sure that gentleman would exercise unremitting watchfulness until a happy result was obtained. If it should be deemed advisable for him to see the patient again, say in about a week or ten days, no marked improvement having taken place meanwhile, he would be happy to come ; but, as Mr. Jebb was well aware, his practice was of a nature which made such journeys difficult.

The physician took a little of the luncheon which had been prepared for him, and then went back to the carriage which was waiting to convey him to Highclere station. He had brought very little comfort to Dora Blake's mind, beyond the assurance that Mr. Jebb was doing what was right, the case being precisely one of those in which hardly anything can be done.

She went back to the darkened room where Morton lay tormented with delirious fancies: now arguing with his electors; now in court at the trial of Humphrey Vargas; now at a college wine party, disputing about some passage in Horace; now raving about Dulcie; always incoherent and disjointed in his talk. While his aunt was engaged with the physician he had not been alone. The rule of the household was that he should never be left. His dressing-room had been appropriated to the preparation of nourishment, and here his old nurse, now a useful servant in the household, kept watch over stewpans of beef tea, and jars of invalid turtle, jelly, arrowroot, and other spoon food which was forced at intervals upon the unwilling patient. Here too were kept medicine bottles and all the litter of a sick room, leaving Morton's own comfortable chamber cool and neat and airy. Lizzie Hardman was sitting at work near the one window which was not curtained. She was an excellent nurse, quiet yet quick, watchful but never demonstrative. She did not argue with the patient in his delirium, or try to rouse him when he lay mute and motionless, with

dull eyes staring at the wall. Whatever anxiety she might feel, she had always the same placid manner in the sick room, moving with the lightest step, and with soft garments that never flapped or rustled: whereas both Tiny and Horatia seemed all ribbons and flounces, and were more restless than the patient himself—now bending over him to offer him lemonade when he had not the least inclination to drink, anon dabbing his forehead with eau de Cologne when the chief desire of his enfeebled mind was to be let alone, and the lightest touch of a strong, healthy hand was like a blow from a blacksmith's hammer.

‘I am sure you must be tired, Lizzie,’ said Dora, in her low, gentle voice, looking down at her *protégée* as she sat working a counterpane in *crewels*, a labour which promised to last as long as Penelope's, but to show a brilliant result when finished. ‘You have been sitting here since six this morning.’

‘I am not at all tired, dear auntie, but I insist upon your going to lie down. You were up all night.’

‘I feel too uneasy to sleep, Lizzie. What is the use of lying down?’

‘You will be resting, at any rate. And you really must try to sleep, or we shall have you as ill as poor Morton. Was the London doctor very hopeful?’

Lizzie did not look up from her work as she asked the question, but her sensitive lips trembled a little, and her face was pale with anxiety.

‘Yes, he seems to think the dear boy’s recovery is only a matter of time and care. We are to be very watchful. The patient is extremely weak. That’s where the peril lies. Has he taken his turtle soup?’

‘Only a spoonful or two. He has such a dislike to that, and indeed to almost everything. Poor old nurse is in despair.’

For several weeks Morton remained in this state, the delirium and sleeplessness continuing. The London physician was summoned again, and on this second occasion was less hopeful. Shafto Jebb went on in his jog-trot way, feeling the patient’s pulse three times a day, and urging the administration of nourishment which the patient refused to take.

In all that weary time Morton had been nursed

by the women of his household. Mr. Jebb had suggested a professional nurse, but Miss Blake had set her face against hireling help. There was old Rebecca, who had nursed Walter Blake and his children after him, and had lived at Tangley ever since the estate had belonged to the Blake family, ready and willing to watch the patient by day and night, were it needful, and skilled in all the arts of sick nursing. There was Miss Blake herself; and lastly there was Lizzie Hardman, the cleverest and quietest of nurses a sick man could desire.

Throughout the long period of his delirium Morton had seemed to feel comfort in Lizzie's presence. He had turned to her rather than to his aunt, as if her hand and voice had a more soothing power.

One evening towards the end of April, when Miss Blake had gone to her room, fairly worn out with anxiety, and when old Rebecca was dozing over her pipkins and tea-kettle by the fire in the dressing-room, Lizzie sat alone at her needlework by Morton's bed, while he lay looking at the wall, apathetic silent, the image of despair.

The tears were slowly streaming down Lizzie's cheeks as she sat there, a quiet figure, seemingly absorbed in womanly work. To-day Mr. Jebb had for the first time confessed himself uneasy as to the result of Morton's illness. The young man's strength was ebbing day by day, and that recuperative effort which the surgeon had expected from nature had not yet been made.

'Unless he makes a desperate rally within the next few days I'm afraid we shall lose him,' said the surgeon.

Lizzie had heard this, and she sat by her old playfellow's bed, praying silently, while the slow tears stole down her pale cheeks, wan with long watching.

She had been thinking what could be done to save him, as he lay there helpless, hopeless, dying. She and Aunt Dora had spent many a sad hour in talking of him and speculating about him during that dismal time, and they had come to the conclusion that some breach with Dulcie was at the root of this illness. How the severance had arisen neither Miss Blake nor Lizzie could imagine, but

that the tie had been broken they both felt convinced, knowing no way else to account for Morton's despair.

To-day Lizzie had heard news that had startled her, and she was now meditating upon a desperate step.

'I would do anything to save his life,' she said to herself,—'anything.' And then she looked at the haggard face, the wild eyes staring at vacancy, and her heart sank within her. Must he pass from madness to death? Would that be the end of his bright young life, so full of promise, of power, and energy for all good deeds?

Throughout his illness he had seemed to understand her better than he understood any one else, to talk more rationally to her than to others.

Presently she knelt beside the bed, and took his wasted hand in hers, and spoke to him in a low, grave voice, slowly and deliberately.

'Would you like to see Dulcie?'

The wild eyes fixed themselves suddenly upon the questioner's face. The name acted like a spell. It was the first time that name had been

pronounced in Morton's hearing since the beginning of his illness.

His burning hand clutched Lizzie Hardman's wrist, his eager eyes scrutinized her face.

'You are making a fool of me,' he said angrily. 'You think I am mad and that you can cheat me, but you can't. Dulcie is in Algeria.'

'She is at Fairview. If you will promise to be a more obedient patient, and to do all the doctor tells you, I will bring her to see you within the next twenty-four hours.'

'Has she come back? Are you sure of that?'

'She came back this afternoon. Sir Everard has been ill—is very ill now, I believe—and he had a fancy for coming back to Fairview. If you will do all I ask you, if you will exercise self-command, and try to get better, I will bring her to see you to-morrow evening.'

'She would not come. She and I are parted for ever. There is a reason—a horrible reason—why she can never be my wife.'

Lizzie thought that this was mere raving—one of the hallucinations of fever.

‘She will come to see you when she knows you are ill. You may have quarrelled, but she cannot have ceased altogether to care for you since last Christmas. I saw you together then, remember, and I know there was love enough and to spare on both sides.’

‘Love is not all in this world,’ said Morton moodily.

And then, after a silence of some minutes, he asked :—

‘Has she really come home? You never told me a lie, Lizzie, yet I’m afraid to trust you. When a man is ill and off his head he is treated like a child—everybody fools him. Has Dulcie come back?’

‘She has, upon my honour.’

‘Then I will eat anything—drink anything—endure anything—only to see her dear face—only to clasp her hand.’

He took a few spoonfuls of egg and brandy, and a little invalid turtle between that time and midnight; and, lulled and comforted by the hope of seeing Dulcie, he slept for an hour or so in

the night, Lizzie watching by him till the bright spring dawn, while Miss Blake slept the sleep of bodily and mental exhaustion.

CHAPTER XI.

WHO CAN MINISTER TO A MIND DISEASED?

SIR EVERARD COURTENAY had returned to his own house a greater invalid than when he left it. He had tried one spot after another upon the shores of the Mediterranean; he had crossed to Algiers; he had visited the monastery of La Trappe, where he was curiously interested in the inscriptions on the walls, and where he made inquiries as to the mode of life in that living tomb. But no advantages of southern climate, no fresh sea breezes could bring vigour to his frame, or brightness to his eye; nor did frequent change of scene, with all the varying incidents of travel, dispel the settled gloom that hung over his spirits.

One day, he told his daughter suddenly that he was going to take her home by easy stages, through Italy and the Mont Cenis tunnel.

‘I want to set my house in order before I die,’ he said.

‘Dear father, why do you talk like that?’ exclaimed Dulcie, clinging to him tenderly. ‘You are better, are you not?’

‘Do you think I am better, Dulcie?’ he asked, looking at her with grave, questioning eyes.

‘I hoped that the milder climate, the change from place to place——’ faltered Dulcie.

‘Would prolong my life. Yes, that is just what the London doctor hoped—or made believe to hope. Yet I find this miserable frame of mine no stronger because I have dragged it all along the southern coast. I find no more delight in life under African skies than in the quiet lanes round Austhorpe. But we will not stop long at Fairview—you would not like it perhaps, now——’

‘I should be very miserable there,’ said Dulcie, her eyes filling with tears.

‘My pet, my darling, you shall not stay. If you would like me to leave you in Florence, I could come back to you in a few weeks. I have friends there who would take charge of you.’

‘No, papa, I will not be parted from you. The duty, the only delight of my life is to be with you!’

They sailed for Naples next morning and travelled at a leisurely pace through Italy, seeing all that was worth seeing between Naples and Turin, Sir Everard hoping that Dulcie’s mind might be diverted by the variety of scenes through which she passed. But neither Africa nor Italy, with all their romantic associations, had power over Dulcie’s mind, or could make her forget Morton Blake and the happy, simple life at Fairview, before the beginning of sorrow. And now they had bent their steps homeward Morton was continually in her mind. She was wondering what she should hear of him when she returned. Perhaps people would tell her that he was engaged to Lady Frances Grange, and she would have to endure their sympathy on account of his fickleness. In any case she would have to bear a great deal. Everybody would be astonished at the rupture of an engagement which had been an established fact in the village, a fact known to the smallest urchin at the parish schools.

‘I hope he does care for Lady Frances,’ she said

to herself sadly. 'Anything would be better than the idea that I had made his life unhappy.'

Yet she could not picture him to herself as Fanny Grange's lover without a bitter pang of jealousy.

They reached Fairview laté in the afternoon, weary with the journey from Turin, whence they had travelled with only a few hours' rest in Paris. There were only servants to receive them, and Dulcie would have died rather than ask any questions about Morton. Sir Everard heard of Morton's illness from Philip Stanton within an hour of his return, and he at once warned Dulcie's maid, Emma Pew, to say not one word to her mistress on the subject.

'Miss Courtenay is so tender-hearted,' said Sir Everard, 'that, although everything is at an end between her and Mr. Blake, she would make herself unhappy if she knew of his illness.'

'But they say the doctors have given him over, sir. If he dies my mistress is sure to hear of it.'

'No doubt some officious fool will make haste to give her the information. But, in the meantime, it is better she should know nothing.'

Sir Everard ordered his phaeton soon after break-

fast next day, and drove alone to Blatchmardean Castle, where he had a mission to fulfil. He had been thinking much of his daughter and his daughter's happiness, since they had started on the long homeward journey. It had been his unhappy fate to come between her and the man to whom she had given her fresh young heart, and he was now eager to devise some means by which she might be beguiled into finding new gladness and delight in life.

'She is so young and childlike—so full of freshness and simplicity. Surely all her capacity for loving cannot be exhausted by this one girlish attachment,' he argued with himself. 'I think I know of some one who could love her as truly as ever Morton Blake loved her, if she would but give him fair play.'

This idea had been more or less in his mind ever since the cancelment of Dulcie's engagement, and this was his chief purpose in coming back to Fairview.

He had seen Lord Beville and Dulcie together, and he had seen enough to convince him that Beville would have gladly taken Morton's place.

He had talked to Beville of his daughter's

engagement on one occasion, and the young man, naturally frank and outspoken, had made no secret of his warm admiration of Dulcie. Sir Everard had observed him the night they all dined together at Aspinall Towers, and what he had seen then had confirmed him in his idea that Beville was capable of a warm and lasting attachment, light and careless though the young man's nature seemed.

And now it was Sir Everard's most ardent desire to see his daughter married—to see her married to a man who would honour and cherish her—but not to Morton Blake, staunch and true though Morton Blake was.

'If Beville could only win her I should die happy,' he said to himself, having made up his mind that for him death was not far off. 'If I could see her an honoured wife, the mistress of a fine old ancestral home, surrounded by new ties, new friends, new interests, and protected by a devoted and chivalrous husband, I should go my way in peace; but to leave her without a friend in the world, robbed by my act of her chosen

lover, depending upon me alone for love and protection, that is too bitter.'

It was a bright spring morning, and the hawthorns in Blatchmardean Park were all bursting into leaf, the larches showed green against a background of Scotch firs, and the chestnut buds were opening on the sunward side of the trees. Sir Everard looked about him thoughtfully as he drove through the park. He had looked of late upon scenes of striking loveliness, mountain and sea, fertile valley and wide winding river, classic city and time-honoured cathedral: yet this simple English beauty of wood and meadow seemed to him fairer and sweeter than the richer growth of a more luxuriant nature, and touched him nearer than the glory of historic cities. Amidst such simple surroundings he had been born and bred, and his joys and sorrows were all associated with the little world within a twenty mile radius of Highclere.

At the castle he asked to see Lady Frances Grange. He was told that she was in the garden, and while the white-haired old butler was giving

him this information Miss Moulton came out of the little drawing-room, where she had been filling old Japanese bowls with ferns and daffodils, and was loud in her astonishment at seeing him.

‘Sir Everard! This is a surprise. We all thought you were in Algeria. I hope you have benefited by the change. But you are not looking as well as your friends would wish to see you.’

‘We came from Turin very rapidly, and I am a little tired with the journey. Is your pupil to be seen this morning, Miss Moulton? I know I am unconscionably early, but I have come to ask Lady Frances a favour.’

‘I am sure she will be pleased to see you. She is roaming about the gardens, I believe—in the wilderness, perhaps. That is her favourite resort on a fine morning. Shall I go with you, or will you try to find her for yourself?’

‘I won’t trouble you. I think I shall be able to find her,’ answered Sir Everard courteously; ‘and when I have told her what I want her to

do for me I will come back and ask your aid in the matter.'

He went across the broad gravel sweep in front of the castle and away to the wilderness, which skirted one side of the park, screening kitchen gardens and stables from the eye of the stranger.

Miss Moulton watched his retreating figure with friendly interest.

'What a fine-looking man he is, and how nobly he carries himself!' she thought. 'If I were a girl, that is just the kind of man I should fall in love with, though he is nearer fifty than forty. But it is a pity he always has that unhappy look, like a man borne down by the weight of secret care. I put it all down to hypochondria. When a man has a handsome income and nothing in the world to trouble him, he takes to reading medical books, and imagines himself the victim of some obscure disease. If God doesn't give us real troubles to bear, we tax our poor little minds to invent sham ones.'

Providence, which had not been lavish in its

favours to Sarah Moulton, had given her at least the comfort of adversity's sweet milk, philosophy. She was always ready to philosophize upon any turn of fortune, and her philosophy was happily of the bright and cheerful order, tending to make the best of things, and ready to believe that other people's burdens were quite as big as—and often bigger than—her own. Out of this view of Fate came a contentedness and serenity of temper that made stout, homely-visaged Sarah Moulton delightful.

The wilderness was a pleasant place on a fine April morning, a land of yellow daffodils and blue periwinkle, overshadowed by larches and Scotch firs, with here a chestnut, and there a walnut, and anon a cluster of wild cherry trees, or a grand old beech, under which the never-to-be-heard-the-last-of Tityrus might have taken his rest. The ground was green with ivy, moss, and the feathery foliage of the wood anemone, save where last year's leaves lay in patches of ruddy brown. White anemone cups, veined with rose-colour, and bright blue dog-violets were dotted about amidst the greenery. A narrow

sandy track, well trodden by Frances Grange and her dogs, meandered through the wilderness, and after following this footpath for some distance, Sir Everard found the young lady sitting on the rugged root of an ancient oak, reading, with a red setter, a liver and white spaniel, and a veteran foxhound, long cast out of the pack, for her companions.

She started to her feet at sight of Sir Everard, and blushed rosy red with surprise, a glow of colour which gave new beauty to the clear nut-brown skin, and new lustre to the dark hazel eyes.

‘I thought—we all thought you were in Algiers,’ she exclaimed, as they shook hands.

‘I left Algiers three weeks ago. I did not find myself gaining so much health or strength from my exile that it was worth while to keep my daughter any longer separated from all her friends—not that she has many friends, even at Austhorpe, poor child. We have lived too lonely a life for that.’

‘I dare say she is very glad to come home?’ answered Frances. ‘She must have felt the separa-

tion from Morton. Was it not a terrible shock to her to find him so ill ?'

'As yet she knows nothing of his illness.'

'Indeed!'

'No. I want to spare her the pain of that knowledge if I can. To that end I kept back a letter which Dora Blake wrote to Dulcie while we were at Algiers, though Miss Blake, no doubt from consideration for my poor girl, affected to make light of Morton's illness.'

'Was it not rather cruel of you to keep Dulcie in the dark ? And will it not make the blow harder for her to bear, if Morton should die ?' asked Frances.

Her voice trembled a little as she spoke of this possibility.

'I hope not. I hope she will be resigned even to that sorrow. It could make the calamity no less were her mind to be prepared for it by the slow tortures of anticipation. I am going to be quite frank and open with you, Lady Frances, for I want to win your friendship, if possible your affection, for my motherless girl.'

‘I have always been inclined to love her,’ answered Frances, ‘but I think she has held me a little at a distance, or we should have been more intimate than we are. Perhaps it was poor Morton’s fault.’

‘Mr. Blake will have no further influence upon my daughter’s life. Her engagement has been broken at my desire.’

Frances paled a little at this shock.

‘You cannot mean it,’ she faltered.

‘I do mean it. The thing has been done some time.’

‘You will break both their hearts. Now I can understand the reason of Morton’s strange illness. The doctors have said that mental distress was the cause. Yet his family could not imagine why he should be unhappy.’

‘Hearts are not so easily broken,’ said Sir Everard. ‘I am sorry to hear of Morton’s illness but I should put it down to the fatigue and worry of the election, rather than to his regret at parting with Dulcie. She, who is all tenderness, has borne the separation with resignation. Possibly were she to

hear of his illness, and imagine that the rupture with her had caused it, her peace of mind might be seriously disturbed, and this is what I am most anxious to avoid. And now, Lady Frances, I fling myself upon your generosity. I want you to help to heal my dear girl's wounded heart, and to guard it from fresh wounds. Will you come to Fairview and be a companion—a sister to her till the cloud has passed? I will do my utmost to make your visit pleasant to you; and if you would like Miss Moulton to come with you, Dulcie and I will be delighted to receive her.'

Frances looked thoughtful, wondering a little at this sudden confidence upon the part of Sir Everard. She had always liked him and admired him. The grave dignity of his manner, that thoughtfulness and reserve which made him so unlike the ordinary country squire, had impressed her with an idea of his superiority. He was her beau ideal of an intellectual man, a thinker and dreamer, as contrasted with that common rustic type of which she saw so much, the man who gives his mind to agriculture and field sports, and spends all his spare capital on

steam ploughs and hunters. She was deeply flattered by his desire that she should be his daughter's friend.

'You take me by surprise, Sir Everard,' she faltered. 'I am inferior to Dulcie in almost everything. She is so accomplished and well-read. I am so hopelessly ignorant. My delight is in animals and out-door amusements; she loves her books and piano and the seclusion of her own rooms. How can I ever be a companion for her?'

'The very contrast between you will be good for both. If she can interest you in her books and various accomplishments, that bright intellect of yours will speedily make up for lost time. And it will be highly advantageous for her health and spirits if you can interest her in living creatures and open-air amusements. She has lived too much indoors, and with the ideas of the dead for her chief companions. She has grown, like myself, too much of a dreamer and a thinker. I cannot infuse brightness and gaiety into her life, because my own life has long been darkened by the shadow of an unforgettable grief. But you can cheer and gladden her.

You can teach her to look forward and not backward.'

'Do you really wish me to try?' asked Frances, looking at him earnestly with bright, candid eyes.

'With all my heart.'

'Then I will come to Fairview at once; to-day, if you like.'

'You cannot come too soon.'

'Always supposing that papa and Miss Moulton are agreeable.'

'Will you not bring Miss Moulton?'

'I think not. She is a dear thing, but she had better stay at home and take care of the Sheik.'

'Is that his lordship?'

'Yes, Beville and I generally call him the Sheik. Will you come with me and see if we can find him? He seldom says no to any wish of mine—so it's almost a formula to ask—but still I always do ask. I like to show my reverence for authority. Gellert—Nellie—Sancho—go home.' This was addressed to the dogs, who scampered off through the under-wood, leaving Sir Everard and Lady Frances to follow at their leisure.

CHAPTER XII.

‘THAT WOULD BE TOO HORRIBLE.’

LORD BLATCHMARDEAN was discovered after some trouble in an upland field, contemplating the performance of a steam plough which had been lent him by a well-to-do tenant. He was surprised to see Sir Everard in company with Lady Frances, and was hearty in his congratulations on the baronet's return to his native soil.

‘There's no place like old England after all,’ said the earl; ‘the smell of the newly-turned earth on a spring morning is better than all your southern climates and mineral waters. But you are not looking so well as I had hoped to see you after your travels, Sir Everard. You look fagged, sir, fagged! People will overdo it when they go abroad.’

‘I have been giving my daughter a hurried view of Italy as we came home,’ answered Sir Everard, ‘and I dare say we both worked a little too hard.’

'Sad news this about Morton Blake,' said the earl.

'Is he so very ill?'

'I'm afraid there's very little chance of his coming round again, from what Jebb told me yesterday. He won't eat, and he can't sleep, and about the only thing he seems able or inclined to do is to die. But perhaps now Miss Courtenay has come home, she may be able to mend matters?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Sir Everard, and then he explained what had happened between Morton and Dulcie, and made his request about Lady Frances.

'What! rob me of Fan! That's rather hard lines. Who's to sing to me of an evening, and who's to beat me at billiards, while she's away? I shall miss her dreadfully; but I dare say the change might do her good. Blatchmardean is a dull old hole for any girl to live in, and Fan has refused Lady Luffington's offer of another season in Clarges Street. She doesn't care for London society. Do you want to go to Fairview, Fan?'

'I should like to be with Dulcie for a few days, especially as she is in trouble,' replied Lady Frances.

'So be it then, Fan. Go and cheer her up a little. I'll ride over to-morrow morning and see how you take to the new pasture. Don't keep her too long, Sir Everard ; she is the chief delight of an old man's life.'

'After steam ploughs and new varieties of mangle, papa. When am I to come, Sir Everard ?'

'I should like to drive you home with me at once ?'

'And Moulty can send my portmanteau after me. May I go, papa ?'

'You may do what you always do, Fan, exactly what you like.'

'Best of Sheiks, adieu.'

She gave his lordship a hug, and then bounded lightly across the heavy ground, just as the steam plough came snorting and tugging towards her, as if maliciously intent upon running her down.

Miss Moulton was infinitely surprised when her pupil came rushing into the snug little morning-room where that indefatigable lady was at work darning house-linen, to announce that she was going to start immediately on a few days' visit to Fairview.

Lady Frances and Miss Courtenay had been tolerably intimate for the last two years, but they had never stayed under each other's roofs, they had never exchanged confidences of any kind; and now it seemed strange that Frances should be eager to bear Dulcie company. As yet, Miss Moulton knew nothing of the change that had taken place in Dulcie's relations with Morton.

'I am off this instant with Sir Everard. You and Betsy will pack my trunk, won't you, dear? You know what I shall want better than I know myself, because I always forget things. Good-bye, you dear old soul; take care of the *pater* and of your dearest self, though that is the last individual you ever think of.'

And so Frances rattled out of the room, took her neat little felt hat and warm jacket from their place in the hall, kissed her old governess half-a-dozen times, and then stepped lightly to her place in the high phaeton.

'I feel awfully grand,' she exclaimed, as they drove along the avenue. 'Papa never drives such a trap as this. He has only a rakish little Newport

Pagnell, and the big family ark, which my grandfather and grandmother used to drive in—a chariot with lemon-coloured panels, and moth-eaten damask cushions. I believe it’s rather a chosen resort for the Sheik’s particular breed of cochin chinas, and that most of our eggs are laid there.’

Frances stole a look at her silent companion, blushing a little at her own loquacity. What a grave and thoughtful face it was, indicative of a self-contained nature—a mind which would jealously guard the secret of its joys and sorrows! It was a face full of interest for a youthful observer, for it was fraught with meanings that youth cannot fathom, and had all the charm of mystery.

Dulcie was surprised at her visitor’s arrival, but received her with gentle courtesy. Of all companions her father could have chosen for her, perhaps Lady Frances Grange was the least welcome; not because of any objection that she had to Frances herself; but on account of her conviction that Morton had cared for Frances in the past and was very likely to care for her still more in the future.

Sir Everard went off to his library, and left the

two girls together in Dulcie's morning-room. They were sitting side by side on the sofa, Dulcie's hands fidgeting nervously with a piece of crewel work, Frances watching her pale, sad face. The effort which she was continually making to appear cheerful in her father's presence, left her dull and apathetic when she was out of his sight.

'My dear Dulcie,' said Frances, putting her arm round the girl's slim waist, 'you are not looking so cheerful as I should wish.'

'I have not much reason to be cheerful,' Dulcie answered rather moodily. 'I suppose papa has told you that my engagement with Morton is broken?'

'He has told me and I am infinitely surprised.'

'I wonder that you should be surprised,' said Dulcie.

'Indeed ! but why should I not be surprised?'

'Because it struck me that you might have some clue to papa's reasons for wishing me to break the engagement.'

'Dulcie, what can you mean ? Come, child, I am a very outspoken individual, not given to beating about bushes when I can go straight to a point. Has

anybody led you to suppose that Morton has ever wavered in his constancy to you? Can you believe that he is capable of being false?'

'Falsehood is a hard word,' faltered Dulcie. 'No, I could never believe him capable of falsehood or meanness; but his feelings might undergo a change. He might find that he had been mistaken, that a sentiment which he had believed a lasting affection was only a passing fancy, and that his real love had been unconsciously given elsewhere.'

'You don't think that he ever cared for me, I hope,' said Frances bluntly.

'I have thought that it might be so.'

'Then you have been egregiously mistaken! What a foolish little thing you are! And was it for this idiotic reason you broke with him?'

'No. It was my dear father's wish that our engagement should come to an end. He refused to give me any reason: but I fancied, somehow, that he thought Morton cared more for you than for me.'

'You are an obedient daughter,' exclaimed Frances somewhat contemptuously. 'Then to gratify a whim of your father's you spoiled Morton's happiness and

your own. I should like to see my dear old Sheik asking such a sacrifice from me, if I cared for any one as you must have cared for Morton.'

'My father is all the world to me,' said Dulcie tenderly. 'He and I have been all in all to each other ever since I was seven years old.'

'Then you never ought to have engaged yourself to Morton,' said Frances severely. And then she relented, and drew Dulcie's golden head on to her shoulder, and tenderly caressed the bright hair.

'My pet, I did not come here to scold you, but to comfort you,' she said lovingly, 'but it is always best to know what we are talking about. The idea of you being jealous of poor looked-down-upon me! Don't you know that Morton has always treated me with the sublime contempt with which young men generally regard their sisters? I have not a taste nor an inclination that is not discordant to him. He hates slang, and detests horsey girls; and I am both slangy and horsey. However, I have no doubt you did right in pleasing your father, who idolizes you, and I know that time will bring consolation for your grief at parting with poor Morton.'

‘I don’t believe I shall ever feel less sorry than I do to-day,’ said Dulcie, with conviction.

‘Oh, yes, you will; trust my experience for that. Women have a wonderful capacity for getting over a grief of that kind.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I had a little trouble of my own, once upon a time, and I think I have mastered it.’

‘You are so brave and bright. Tell me all about it,’ urged Dulcie, looking up at her affectionately.

She had never known what it was to have a companion and *confidante* of her own sex. Her only friend, her only adviser, had been her father. And now, for the first time in her life, she found that there was comfort in girlish sympathy and girlish friendship.

‘No, dearest. It was all foolishness. I had rather not talk about it. The wound is not so completely healed that I can bear to touch it carelessly just yet. Let us talk about other things. What a sweet room this is—so bright and womanly—full of china and flowers, and all womanly things! And what a lovely piano!’

'That was a New Year's gift from papa.'

'Privileged young person, to have a father with power and inclination to give such gifts. So far as inclination goes, my father would load me with benefits, but he never has any spare cash. What an interesting man Sir Everard is!'

'Is he not? I am so glad you like him. He is all goodness and thoughtfulness for others; yet people do not always understand, or even like him. He is too reserved in his manners to please everybody.'

'I don't care a straw for the kind of man who pleases everybody. That order of being would never interest me as your father does. He gives me the impression that he has known some great sorrow, and has never entirely recovered from the shock.'

'You have heard his story, have you not? It was my poor mother's sudden death which overshadowed his life. He wandered about, alone, upon the Continent for years, and it was only seven years after mamma's death that he brought me back to Fairview. I had been brought up by my aunt in Wales, and had not seen my father once during all that time.

I think the very idea of me was hateful to him in those days. It was only later that he began to find out there was some comfort in having a daughter. From that time forward my chief duty has been to cheer and console him.’

‘And to that duty you are willing to sacrifice your own happiness? Well, Dulcie, my dear, you are a good girl, and I will never incite you to rebellion.’

The two girls passed the morning together happily. Dulcie took Frances on a tour of exploration round the gardens and stables and poultry yard, where everything was new to herself after nearly four months’ absence. They looked at hothouses and greenhouses, and had long confabulations with the head gardener, who was a man of taste, and had always some small improvement to suggest to Miss Courtenay. Then came a ramble through the house, during which Dulcie chose the prettiest spare room for her visitor—a room with an old Tudor window wreathed with Australian clematis and yellow jessamine.

Then came luncheon, at which meal Sir Everard

rarely appeared, so the two girls had the dining-room to themselves, and then Dulcie proposed a drive in her pony carriage.

'If you don't care about driving very much, I think I'd rather loaf about the garden with you, or hear you play Chopin on that delicious piano,' said Frances artfully.

'I don't care in the least about driving; I only want to amuse you.'

'Then let us stay at home by all means,' decided Frances.

She considered herself in some measure the guardian of Dulcie's peace: Sir Everard had told her that he wished to keep the knowledge of Morton's illness from his daughter. Were they to drive through the village they would be almost sure to meet Shafto Jebb, or Mr. Mawk, the curate, or some other gossip, who would inevitably condole with Dulcie about her lover's illness. The only safety was in keeping within the four walls of Fairview, where the servants had been warned to say not a word to their mistress.

They went back to the morning-room, and

Frances seated herself in luxurious idleness on the fleecy white rug in front of the wood fire.

‘Now play away to your heart’s content, Dulcie dear, while I abandon myself to dreams of all that might have been, had life been utterly different. Even the most matter-of-fact people are sentimental once in a way, and Chopin always sets me dreaming.’

‘What shall I play, Lady Frances?’

‘If you call me Lady Frances I shall go home this afternoon. Call me Fan. It sounds rather like the name of an asthmatic Blenheim spaniel, but all the people who care for me call me by it.’

‘Morton used to call you Fan, I remember,’ said Dulcie.

‘My dearest, Morton cares for me just as much as he cares for his horse or his dog. He is used to me. We have ridden, and danced, and played billiards together; and before he knew you Blatchmardean was the chosen resort of his idle hours.’

‘Did you see much of him while we were away?’ faltered Dulcie.

‘Very little. He was busy with his election, don’t you know?’ answered Frances hurriedly, dreading

lest the next question should be an inquiry about Morton's health and spirits. 'I think, dearest, we had better not talk of him. It is only fostering your unhappiness.'

'Then I will play to you—and think of him,' answered Dulcie softly.

She played the saddest minor strains of her favourite composer, while Frances Grange sat looking at the burning logs and thinking what a tangled skein life was altogether. Why had Sir Edward insisted upon the rupture of an engagement which for nearly a year he had seemed to approve? The whole thing appeared arbitrary and unkind to the last degree.

'Yet I cannot believe him ungenerous or unkind,' she thought, remembering the grave beauty of that thoughtful face whose meaning she had so vainly tried to penetrate.

What a noble heart that must be which could be steadfast for twenty years to the memory of a lost love! How many men in Sir Everard's position would have married after a year or two of widowhood! These considerations gave the thoughtful

recluse of fifty a curious interest in Frances Grange's mind.

Dulcie played for an hour or more, and then the two girls put on their hats and jackets, and wandered out into the garden again. It was a mild, sunshiny afternoon, and the view from the terrace looked lovely in the clear light. They walked up and down for some time talking, and they were just turning to go back to the house when Dulcie saw a figure approaching them along the avenue that led from the lodge gate.

'Surely it is Miss Hardman,' she exclaimed.

'What an odd thing for her to call alone!'

'You had better not see her,' said Frances hastily.

'Sir Everard would not like it.'

'Why should he mind? It can make no difference. Yes, I shall certainly see her. She is a dear, good, true-hearted girl. And I shall hear all about Morton and Aunt Dora. My auntie, I used to call her; thinking that she would be really my aunt before long. Oh, Fanny, I can't tell you how fond I am of her, or how good she has been to me. And now she must think me false and ungrateful.'

'Why should she think that? She must know that you only obey your father.'

'But she cannot tell what pain and grief that obedience cost me. She may think that I can throw Morton off without a pang. I dread meeting even Lizzie Hardman.'

'Then run indoors as fast as you can, and leave me to explain matters to her. She will easily understand that you don't care to meet any one from Tangley,' urged Frances, feeling that this was the last chance of warding off those evil tidings which Dulcie was sure to hear from Miss Hardman.

'No, I would not be uncivil to her for the world.'

Lizzie was close to them by this time. She held out her hand to Dulcie, but there was a coldness in her greeting quite unlike her old manner to Morton's betrothed.

'Of course, you have heard?' she said.

'Heard what? If it is about Morton you are talking, I have heard nothing.'

'What, nobody has told you that he is at death's door—that for once in a way a broken heart is likely to prove fatal?'

Dulcie turned pale as death, and clung to Frances as if she would have fallen to the ground without her support.

‘How cruel of you to bounce out your information upon her like that,’ exclaimed Frances indignantly.

‘Somebody must tell her the truth. She has been cruel to Morton. She has trifled with him and broken his heart. Why should she not be told that he is dying? It is no harder for her than for others.’

‘Not dying,’ gasped Dulcie. ‘For God’s sake don’t say that he is dying.’

‘He is so near death that it will need almost a miracle to save him. He was so fond of you that perhaps the very sight of you will bring him back to life. Will you come to him?’

‘Yes,’ answered Dulcie, without a thought of father or duty.

‘Dulcie,’ remonstrated Frances, feeling that her position was becoming momentarily more critical, ‘you forget your promise to Sir Everard.’

‘I promised my father that I would not marry Morton, not that I would not see him. I will come

this instant, Lizzie. You must explain everything to papa, Fanny.'

'I would not face him in his anger for worlds. Dulcie, you must not do anything so rash,' remonstrated Frances.

'If you want to save his life, come at once,' pleaded Lizzie. 'I left the pony carriage at the lodge. You are dressed—come at once. I promised Morton he should see you to-day.'

'What good can it do?' expostulated Lady Frances.

'Perhaps none. He may die before to-night. But he would like to see her, and I think she would like to see him before he goes.'

'Before he goes. Then you think he is dying?' cried Dulcie.

'The doctors seem to have very little hope. Yet I believe he is just a shade better to-day, and that the improvement has arisen from the hope of seeing you.'

'Why not wait to ask your father's permission?' urged Frances.

'And risk a refusal. No, there is no time for

waiting. Come,’ said Lizzie. ‘I will drive you back when you have seen him.’

‘And then I can explain everything to my father,’ said Dulcie. ‘I shall be back in time for dinner. You must give papa his cup of tea, Frances dear, and beg him to forgive me.’

‘I would as soon face a lion in his wrath,’ thought Frances.

They had been walking towards the lodge during this conversation. There stood Aunt Dora’s basket carriage and sturdy gray pony, a boy in pepper-and-salt in attendance upon him.

Lizzie jumped in and took the reins, Dulcie seated herself by her side, the boy sprang to his place behind, and away spun the pony towards Tangley at a capital pace, like a pony that knew a good deal depended upon him.

‘How long has he been ill?’ asked Dulcie in a low voice.

‘For many weeks. From the time of the election he seemed out of spirits, and he kept aloof from us all. We thought that his failure worried him, and that he would get over it all the better if he were left

to himself. But as time went on he got into a very low way. He could not sleep—he was always roaming about—wrote and read late into the night—led an irregular, rambling kind of life. Then he broke down altogether, took to his bed, and began to be alarmingly delirious. It seemed to be a kind of brain fever; but even the London physician could hardly give us any definite explanation of the illness, or what had caused it. All we could do was to nurse him carefully, and we have done that,' said Lizzie, with tears in her eyes. 'It has been a terrible time for us all, and God only knows how it is to end.'

A quarter of an hour's rapid driving brought them to Tanglely Manor.

'You shall not see any one except Morton unless you like,' said Lizzie thoughtfully, as she drove in through the stable gates, which were at the side of the house, screened from all the windows by the thick growth of shrubberies and fine old trees. 'Miss Blake is lying down in her own room—the two girls will be in the drawing-room—they are almost worn out with anxiety and suspense, poor things, and think it hard that they are not allowed to help in the

nursing. But Mr. Jebb thought it better that Aunt Dora, the old nurse, and I should take entire charge of Morton.'

'I shall be very glad to escape seeing them,' answered Dulcie. 'I should feel like a criminal in their sight; and yet Heaven knows I am not to blame.'

'We'll slip up to Morton's room,' said Lizzie, when they had alighted at a little side door. 'There is no one with him but old Becky.'

They went in through a lobby, and ran lightly up the servants' staircase, which brought them to the corridor that led to Morton's room. Silently, softly, Lizzie Hardman led Dulcie to the sick room. It was in semi-darkness. The old nurse was nodding by the fire, Morton was talking to himself in a strange rambling way, as the door opened; but quietly as Lizzie opened it, he lifted himself suddenly in his bed, and called out, 'Dulcie, my Dulcie, come to me.' In the next instant he was sobbing on her shoulder, clinging to her with his wasted arms.

'Oh, my love, my love, how changed you are!'

sighed Dulcie, looking tenderly down at the hollow cheeks, the ghastly, pinched face.

' Your work, Dulcie. You thought it was nothing to fling me off; but to me it made all the difference between joy and despair. Life was not worth living without you.'

And then he fell back on the pillow exhausted, and his mind began to wander again. He talked ramblingly—in broken sentences—and Dulcie caught only the words ' his daughter—better to be parted—treason against the dead.'

She sat by his bed, holding his shrunken hand in hers, sometimes bending down to kiss it tenderly, raining tears upon it. Her soul was rising up in rebellion against her father all the while. For the first time in her life she felt herself in revolt against him. Why had he parted her from Morton? To what end was all this misery? When he imposed this parting upon her she had believed, trusting entirely in her father's goodness, that he knew Morton to be in some manner unworthy of her affection—that he had spared her the humiliating knowledge of her lover's inconstancy. But here was Morton constant even to

death. For what end, save to gratify an unjustifiable caprice of her father's, had he been brought to the edge of the grave?

‘How they must all hate me!’ Dulcie said to herself.

The old nurse had retired to the adjoining room. Lizzie sat, half hidden, in the big arm-chair by the fire. There was no sound save the dropping of the ashes on the hearth, and those occasional murmurs of disjointed speech from Morton. Dulcie sat by him for an hour, his hand clasped in hers almost all the time. Once he looked up at her with a smile strangely unlike his own, as it seemed to her, and murmured, ‘It is good of you to come; it is very sweet to see you once more, if only for a little while, my darling. Fate has parted us, Dulcie. Your father was right; he showed his sound judgment. It seems cruel, doesn't it? sorely hard upon you and me. Yet it was just and right. It is the one act in his life which I cannot blame.’

Was this delirium? Dulcie asked herself; or did her lover really mean that he approved of Sir Everard's conduct in cancelling their engagement?

His speech implied that there was some reason why he and she should be parted, and that her father had acted wisely and honourably in recognising that reason. Yet what possible cause for their severance could there be so long as Morton was true? and of his truth and constancy there could be little doubt.

She dared not question him in his weak state, lest she should agitate him. She could only sit quietly by his side, wondering at his strange words, and inclined to think that they were only a portion of that delirious speech which, as Lizzie had told her, had been one of the most alarming features of his illness, continuing so long that the doctors had begun to fear the patient's brain must be permanently injured. For some time Morton lay motionless and silent, as if unconscious of Dulcie's presence. Then he suddenly turned his face to the wall, with a groan of bitterest anguish.

'The son of the murdered and the daughter of the murderer—that would be too horrible,' he cried.

CHAPTER XIII.

NEVER AGAIN.

LADY FRANCES went back to the house sorely perplexed in mind. She felt as if she had broken faith with Sir Everard. He had, in a manner, confided his daughter to her care, and she had shown herself useless as a guardian.

‘I dread to tell him what has happened,’ she said to herself. ‘I feel sure that serious face of his can look awfully severe. And I am to give him his tea, Dulcie said. Tea, forsooth! As if such a man as that were to be tamed by tea! It’s more likely he will give me my *cong  *.’

She went back to the morning-room, where a fresh log had been put upon the fire, and where Scroope was busy setting out the octagon tea-table, with its bright china, and quaint silver pot and kettle.

‘Will Miss Courtenay make tea, my lady, or shall I?’ asked Scroope.

‘Miss Courtenay has gone out. You had better

make the tea, please, as you know how your master likes it.'

'Yes, my lady,' answered Scroope, looking intensely astonished.

Frances seated herself in a low basket chair, took up a book, and pretended to be engrossed in its contents. It was a volume of Tennyson's *Idylls*, and although Lady Frances Grange read three or four pages about the quest of the Holy Grail, she had not the faintest idea what the Grail was, or why any one wanted to find it. Her mind was troubled about Dulcie and Dulcie's father. Yet she looked the image of studiousness as she sat poring over her book, a neat little figure, simply clad in a dark blue cloth dress, over a velvet petticoat, from the hem of which peeped out a slender foot in its substantial well-made boot. Lady Frances never had many gowns or many boots, but all that she wore was of the best and neatest, and generally in the latest fashion. 'A girl who has only one gown at a time can easily keep abreast with fashion,' she told her richer acquaintance. 'It is you young women who go in for twenty gowns a year who are always behind the

times. You are burdened with a heap of clothes that want wearing out.'

Scroope made the tea, gave a last glance at the table to see if its arrangements were up to that high standard which a butler who has a very easy place feels ought to be reached by him, and then withdrew. Lady Frances flung her book face downwards on the rug directly he was gone.

'It's useless trying to read,' she exclaimed petulantly. 'I never was good at understanding Tennyson, and to-day I feel as if my head were stuffed with cotton wool instead of brains.'

Sir Everard came in at this moment.

'Well, Dulcie, are you ready to give me my tea?' he asked; and then seeing that Lady Frances was alone, he came up to the hearth.

He looked at her for a moment or so with grave admiration. The bright head, with its boyish curls; the graceful figure; the piquant, animated face, might win an admiring glance even from the most preoccupied of men. He looked from that blushing, perplexed face to the book on the hearth-rug, and then bent to pick up the volume.

‘The Laureate does not appear to have pleased you, Lady Frances,’ he said gravely.

‘Forgive me for having used Dulcie’s book so badly. But I was awfully worried, and the Holy Grail made me savage. Oh, Sir Everard, I’m afraid you will be dreadfully angry with me; and yet I am not to blame. Dulcie has gone to see Morton Blake.’

And then she went on to describe what had happened.

‘I am sorry my daughter had not more self-respect,’ he said, with deep disapproval.

‘But if he is at the point of death—if her presence could comfort him—perhaps save his life.’

‘That is all folly. If a man is dying, the creature he loves best in this world cannot prolong his life by so much as an hour. My daughter has degraded herself and me by this ridiculous proceeding. I wonder at her folly.’

‘Do not be hard upon her, Sir Everard. Consider that only a few months ago she looked upon Morton Blake as her future husband. Remember how happy she was in that engagement.’

‘ Oh, I see, you are on her side. You think I have used her cruelly,’ exclaimed Sir Everard, gloomily.

‘ I do.’

‘ Child, you do not know what you are talking about. There is that in Morton’s character which would have made his marriage with Dulcie a life-long misery for both. I know that, and he knows it too. Did he urge me to alter my determination ? No. He submitted uncomplainingly to the cancellation of his engagement, because he knew that I had acted wisely in breaking it.’

‘ I cannot understand you,’ faltered Frances. ‘ The whole matter is a mystery to me. I have known Morton intimately for years. I have looked up to him, and admired him, as an elder brother and I have never discovered any point in his character that was not admirable. And now you tell me that he is no fit husband for Dulcie ; that he would make her life miserable.’

Be content to believe in the fact, without wanting to know why it is so,’ answered Sir Everard quietly. ‘ And now, as Dulcie is away, perhaps you will do me the honour to give me some tea.’

‘Pray forgive me, I am very neglectful,’ faltered Frances.

‘You are all that is sweet and womanly. But you mustn’t let her be tempted to visit Morton again,’ said Sir Everard, who seemed to have recovered his good-humour.

Frances breathed more freely, and as her host began to talk of other things, of her father and his farm, her brother, and his views of life, his pursuits and ambitions, her spirits revived, and she talked freely, forgetting Dulcie’s troubles and everything else in the world except that she was in the society of a remarkably interesting man. They talked a great deal of Beville, in whose tastes and inclinations Sir Everard seemed warmly interested.

‘He is not without ambition, I suppose?’ he said, after Frances had described her brother’s love of hunting and shooting, fishing and coursing, polo and lawn tennis. ‘A man’s whole mind cannot be given up to amusements.’

‘Well, no, I suppose not. But Beville is very young, you see. He was only three-and-twenty last October, and I don’t think that he takes a very

serious view of life. That will come, I dare say, later.'

'It is to be hoped so. He would not like to be buried alive in Daleshire all his days, I should think.'

'Buried alive in such a hunting country! Why, where could he be better off?'

'Well, there is such a thing as a public career for a young man—there is such a place as the House of Commons.'

'Elections are so expensive,' said Frances, with a careless shrug. 'Besides, the Sheik could never do without Beville. They are devoted to each other. You have no idea what a united family we are. Our poverty has drawn us closer together.'

'But if Beville had plenty of money——'

'I suppose you mean if he were to marry an heiress,' said Frances naïvely. 'People have made that suggestion to me before; but Beville detests heiresses. He will marry for love or not at all.'

'Would it not be possible for him to find a loveable heiress?'

'I don't know,' faltered Frances, blushing vehe-

mently. 'Poor Beville! Don't ask me anything more about him, please! There are subjects that must be sacred. As to his ambition, I am afraid that has never been roused yet. He is very fond of Blatchmardean, and pulls heartily with the Pater in all his efforts to free the estate. But as for Parliament—a public life—that kind of thing is out of his line. He is always in the first flight, he has won no end of cups at long jumps, and hammer-throwing, and polo; though he has never been a pot-hunter, don't you know?' said Lady Frances gravely.

'A pot-hunter? What in heaven's name is that?'

'A man who goes in for athletics for the sake of winning prizes.'

'I understand. The phrase is expressive.'

'But hardly elegant from a lady's lips, you would say,' returned Frances, laughing.

Just then the door opened and Dulcie came in. She was deadlly pale, and she crept to the hearth and dropped into her usual chair in a curiously listless, half-mechanical way, saying not a word to her father or Lady Frances.

‘My poor pet, how weary and white and cold you look!’ exclaimed Frances. ‘Let me give you some warm tea. Your father is not angry, dearest. Don’t look at him in that frightened way.’

Dulcie was looking up at her father with a countenance that expressed a strange, vague terror, gazing at him as she had never gazed before.

‘No, my love, I am not angry,’ said Sir Everard. ‘Your friend has pleaded for you very sweetly, and you know it is not in my nature to be angry with my dearest girl. But you have done a foolish thing all the same, love. You have lowered your own dignity by this visit to Morton’s sick room. You must never do such a thing again.’

‘I never shall. No, father, of my own free will I will never see Morton Blake again.’

She gave a little shuddering cry, and covered her face with her hands, then rose as if she would have run out of the room, tottered forward a few paces, and fell like a log at her father’s feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN TANGLEY WOOD.

DULCIE recovered from her fainting fit, only to fall into a state of extreme prostration, which lasted for some days. She was not actually ill, and when Sir Everard talked of sending for Mr. Jebb she entreated most earnestly that he might not be summoned.

‘There is nothing amiss with me—nothing,’ she said wearily, ‘except perhaps that I am tired. Let me rest, papa, and do not make yourself unhappy about me. I have no doubt I shall live to be a very old woman. I can see a long vista of years stretching before me.’

She gave a heart-breaking sigh, and turned her face to the wall. This was the longest speech she had made since she came from Tangley Manor. Hitherto she had been curiously silent; not sullen or impatient, but as if mute from utter weariness and depression of soul.

‘You see, Sir Everard,’ Fanny Grange said, when she and the baronet were alone, ‘it is not so easy to break a tie of that kind.’

He stood at the window of his study with his back to Frances, looking out at the bright parterre, gay with its variety of spring flowers—tulips, jonquils, hyacinths, ranunculus—and was slow to answer her. He had asked her to come to his study and talk to him about his daughter, who was lying on the sofa in her bedroom, gazing listlessly at the blue bright sky, employed neither with book nor work, interested in nothing—the image of silent despair.

‘I ought not to have brought her home,’ said Sir Everard at last; ‘that was a mistake. But I was seized with a sudden dread of dying abroad and leaving her alone and helpless in a strange country. I have made no friends for her in all these years. We have been all the world to each other; and now that the sands in my glass are nearly run——’

‘Sir Everard,’ exclaimed Frances, with a pained expression, ‘how can you talk like that? You are in the prime of life.’

‘I am at an age which with some men means the

middle stage of life—with me it means decline. It is not for every one that the drama of life extends to five acts—some play out their parts in three. The evening shadows are closing round me, Lady Frances. My little girl will soon be alone in this bleak, unfriendly world. If I could but see her happy—happy with another than Morton Blake—before I go, I should die—almost—at peace.’

‘I cannot understand why you should be so determined against Dulcie’s marriage with Morton.’

‘I do not ask you to understand. I have my own reasons, which I prefer to keep to myself. And yet I am treating you more frankly than I have ever treated any one else, because I admire your character—and I want you to be my Dulcie’s friend.’

‘I am her friend with all my heart and soul. The few days that I have spent with her have endeared her to me more than I can say. Perhaps it is because I pity her so much.’

‘Good,’ said Sir Everard, ‘let us shake hands upon that.’

The little brown hand trembled in his as he clasped it in frankest friendship—never suspecting

that an interest in himself and in his sorrow might be growing up in the girl's mind, deeper and stronger than friendship.

'But that you and Dulcie should be friends is only the first part of my scheme,' he pursued ; 'I should like you to be sisters.'

'Adopted sisters.'

'No. Sisters-in-law in fact, real sisters in affection. I have a shrewd suspicion that your brother has a sneaking kindness for Dulcie.'

'A sneaking kindness,' echoed Frances ; 'why, he adores her. I ought not to betray his secret, poor fellow ; because he has a certain amount of pride, and has never said a word to me about his feelings on the subject. But the fact has long been obvious to the Sheik, and Moulty, and me—quite too ridiculously apparent, poor fellow. But what is the good of that ? Dulcie will never think of him.'

'How do you know that ? A woman is always inclined to be grateful to a man who honestly and intensely loves her ; and out of gratitude love—may come,' concluded Sir Everard, with a sudden sigh, as if the words evoked some painful memory.

‘It would make me very happy to think that poor Beville had a chance,’ said Frances thoughtfully, ‘but I have a rooted idea that he is just the very last young man Dulcie would ever care about, especially after having been engaged to Morton.’

‘Let him come here—let him try his fate,’ answered Sir Everard. ‘He is a fine, frank young fellow—and—well—if he has not invented gunpowder, what of that? Your genius is apt to be a dangerous incendiary kind of personage, who is better adapted for anything in life than to make a good husband and father.’

‘Dulcie is so clever, so accomplished,’ sighed Lady Frances.

‘Then she will be able to refine and enlarge the ideas of a husband.’

‘I’m afraid Beville has hardly a thought of anything but horses and dogs.’

‘He is your brother, and you naturally underrate him,’ said Sir Everard impatiently. ‘Let him come to us, and make himself at home with us. Do not breathe a word to him about this idea of mine. That is a secret between you and me, remember.’

‘I shall not forget,’ answered Frances, gentler and more earnest of speech than she had been wont to be, softened perhaps by the quiet refinement of all things at Fairview. ‘I am more flattered than I can say that you should trust me, Sir Everard, and believe me you *may* trust me.’

‘I am sure of that,’ he answered gravely.

And then with almost fatherly tenderness he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and looked earnestly into her upturned face. That mobile countenance changed as he looked. A crimson flush mounted to the girl’s cheek and brow, and faded as suddenly, leaving her very pale.

‘Dear child, it is sweet to me to win your friendship, even at the close of life,’ he said earnestly. ‘You will be to me almost a second daughter. And now go to my pet, and try to win a smile from her. You are like a good angel in the house.’

The days went by heavily for all the household, for all were full of anxiety about Dulcie. Gradually, slowly, the fair young face lost its painful look of blank amaze, as at the sudden revelation of some terrible grief, and softened into an expression of

mournful resignation. News came from Tangley of Morton's improvement. The peril was said to be over. His recovery must needs be slow; but the angel of death no longer hovered near the threshold.

This good news Dulcie heard on the day she left her bedroom, and returned to the ordinary duties of life. Her informant was Mr. Mawk, the curate-in-charge of the bare old church at Austhorpe, who came to make his adieux before departing to shed the light of his talents and virtues upon a congregation more inclined to sympathize with advanced Ritualism than were the farmers and farmers' wives and daughters of rustic Daleshire.

'The fact is, Miss Courtenay,' said the curate, 'this place is utterly benighted, and the people so love darkness that they resent any effort to enlighten them. They are a well-meaning set of people, I admit, and according to their lights they have been kind to me; but their ignorance and prejudice are something astounding; and the man who remains among them must be content to hide his light under a bushel. How my successor, Mr. Haldimond, can reconcile himself to the idea of vegetating in such a

hole—I beg your pardon, Miss Courtenay ; Fairview, of course, is charming—is more than I can understand.’

‘ You have endured our darkness for nearly three years,’ said Dulcie, with a faint smile at his grave self-importance. ‘ Why should it be harder for Mr. Haldimond to bear than for you?’

‘ Because he is a man of some mark, while I had only just been ordained when I came to Austhorpe. Haldimond is my senior by twelve or fourteen years. He is a Christchurch man, and a ripe scholar.’

‘ I hope he will be good to the poor,’ said Dulcie.

‘ I hope he plays lawn tennis,’ said Frances.

‘ Oh, he is one of the best of men, and is sure to do his duty. He is a man of extraordinary energy and earnestness. Whatever he takes upon himself to do, he will do with all his heart and soul. That is why I cannot understand his putting up with such a contracted sphere for his labours. When last I heard of him he was curate-in-charge of an immense parish in Ratcliff Highway, all among sailors and the very dregs of the population. He is a great athlete, Lady Frances, and was a crack tennis player

at Oxford when the game was just beginning to be fashionable. I am sure you will like him.'

And now Mr Mawk, not without a touch of sentiment, took his farewell, invoking all manner of blessings on Dulcie before he went.

'I am rejoiced to hear that Mr. Blake's long illness has taken such a happy turn,' he said as he shook hands with her. 'What anxiety you must have suffered while the result was doubtful! I hope when the happy event takes place I may be allowed to assist in the ceremony. I shall be charmed to come any distance for that purpose.'

'You are very good,' faltered Dulcie, with a pale, distressed face, 'but I think it will be very long before you will be called upon to assist at my marriage.'

'Ger—good gracious, you don't—er—mean to say ——' stammered the curate, looking from Dulcie to her friend in bewilderment.

Lady Frances frowned at him, and he held his peace, and bowed himself out awkwardly.

'Fanny dear, stop their congratulations and questions somehow,' cried Dulcie, hiding her tears upon Frances Grange's shoulder.

‘But is it not a relief to know that he is recovering, that he is not going to die of your desertion?’

‘Yes, that ought to make me happy, ought it not?’ answered Dulcie, with a faint smile. ‘And I think it would—if—if——’

Here she burst into passionate weeping, and sobbed out her grief upon her friend’s breast. Frances let her cry, and asked no questions, and uttered no consoling commonplaces. Tears were a better balm for grief than any preachment from friendly lips. Yet Frances was not a little mystified by this vehement sorrow, which seemed inconsistent with Dulcie’s unselfish nature. Surely the girl ought to have been so rejoiced at her lover’s recovery, that her own grief should have been forgotten, or put aside as of little moment.

‘And now, young lady, I am not going to let you mope indoors any longer,’ said Frances, when Dulcie had dried her tears. ‘It is a lovely afternoon, and you shall drive me into the woods, and we’ll gather a heap of primroses, dog-violets, and wood anemones, to decorate the church with next Sunday, so that this Christchurch scholar may see that stony barn

brightened and beautified. Nothing like hard work as a cure for low spirits ; and you shall work like a galley slave, Mistress Dulcie. Come, darling, order your carriage, and then we'll go and put on our hats.'

'Do you really wish to drive, Fanny?'

'I shall expire if you stifle me indoors any longer. Remember I am used to an open-air life.'

'Then I'll order the carriage at once, dear,' said Dulcie submissively.

Half an hour later the two girls were in the wood near Tangley Manor, gathering wild flowers, while the ponies waited in a sheltered corner, and the groomling in charge slumbered placidly in the bottom of the carriage, with the reins in his hands.

Tangley Wood was a lovely spot on such an afternoon as this—April at her best and brightest, when she has shed her last tears, and tricked herself out in sunshine, before tripping off the stage she has done so much to beautify. The hawthorns were all in leaf, the hollies were gay with the lingering berries of last autumn, and the mossy ground was covered with spring flowers. The balmy air, the silence of the wood, broken only by a blackbird's melodious

whistle, had a tranquilizing effect upon Dulcie's nerves and spirits. Nature is so lovely that even our darkest moods must yield to her soothing power. And Frances Grange was one of those girls with whom it was almost impossible to be silent or dull. She was so full of brightness and fun, so quick at seizing the ridiculous side of a subject. She pretended not to see that Dulcie was full of care, and insisted upon discussing Mr. Mawk and his prospects, clerical and matrimonial, with a wealth of absurd conjecture that made Dulcie smile in spite of herself.

Then, again, there is a pleasure in all work done for a good purpose.

A late Easter was just over, and the hothouse flowers which had been lent for the Easter decorations had been restored to their owners. The idea of decorating the old gray church for Low Sunday with these simple woodland blossoms was delightful to Dulcie. She worked her hardest, digging up great masses of feathery moss, gathering innumerable primroses and blue scentless violets, until she had nearly filled one large basket, while Frances worked at another.

Dulcie was on her knees in a hawthorn thicket, her hat thrown off, and the sun streaming upon her bright hair through the leafless oaks above her, when she was startled by the rustling of footsteps amongst the fallen leaves, and looking up saw a woman and three children approaching slowly through the thicket, the children gathering flowers as they came, the woman walking with feeble, uncertain footsteps, as if even a quiet ramble in that lovely woodland were too much for her strength.

There was a bank near Dulcie, and here the mother sat down to rest, while the children strayed about among the trees. 'Play at hide-and-seek, dears,' she said, 'while poor ma rests a little. But don't go far.'

'We won't lose you, ma dear,' cried a shrill boy; we know the big oak tree, and we'll come back soon.'

Off they scampered. Shabby knickerbockers and gray stockings, chubby legs and scarlet socks, all disappeared in a rush behind the brown oak boles. The mother sighed, and then coughed, and sighed again, and laid her thin hand upon her chest, as if in

pain. Dulcie looked up from her primroses, and at the sight of the wan cheek with its hectic flush she was moved to compassion. She left her basket and went to the bank where the woman was sitting.

‘I’m afraid you are not very strong,’ she said, sitting beside her, and looking at her with sweetest sympathy.

‘No,’ the woman answered, with her eyes half closed, and her head drooping a little. ‘I get weaker and weaker every day, in spite of this fine fresh air and all the kindness that has been shown to me. And the pain in my chest gets worse.’

She lifted her head and looked at Dulcie, and at sight of the sweet, pitying face, and innocent blue eyes, gave a little start.

‘Surely no one else could have just such eyes as those,’ she said. ‘You must be Miss Courtenay.’

‘Yes, that is my name. I thought you were a stranger here, for I know almost every one about. How do you happen to recognise me?’

‘Because I lived four years in your mother’s service. I knew you by your likeness to her. I have been expecting to meet you somewhere or somehow

for the last ten days, for I knew you had come home, and you have been a good deal in my mind. But it was not guesswork when I recognised you. You have Miss Alice Rothney's eyes.'

'I have often been told I am like my mother. And you were really in her service before she was married?'

'Before and after her marriage. I was with her till she died.'

Dulcie turned very pale, and looked at the woman uneasily, wistfully, as if she would fain have questioned her, yet shrank from doing so.

'Strange that I should meet you like this,' she said thoughtfully.

'Hardly strange, dear Miss Courtenay, if you are in the habit of walking in this wood. I am living in a cottage close by, and I come here every day. I am just able to crawl as far as this, and I sit here and work while my children play about.'

'I am glad to have met you. There are no servants at Fairview who remember my poor mother,' said Dulcie, with more reserve than was usual to her.

'No, the servants were all dismissed when Sir

Everard went abroad. I am more than glad to see you, Miss Courtenay. I have been hoping and praying that I might look upon your face before I died.'

'Do not talk of dying. I hope the summer will bring you strength.'

'The summer will make no difference to me, dear young lady. I doubt if I shall see the beginning of it. I know I shall not see the end. Yes, I have longed to meet you, longed with all my heart, for I loved your dear mother fondly.'

'Then why did you not stay to take care of me when she was gone? I should have loved to have some one about me who had known her—some one who could have talked to me of her.'

'Sir Everard dismissed us all when he broke up his household,' answered Lucy. 'I am not saying that as a complaint against him, for he was a good and generous master to me, but I want you to know that I should never have left you of my own accord. I would have been true and faithful to you as I was true and faithful to her.'

'Tell me about her,' cried Dulcie impulsively, forgetting her reserve of a few minutes ago.

‘She was the loveliest woman I ever saw—the loveliest and the sweetest. Her nature was as beautiful as her face.’

‘And was she happy, quite happy?’ asked Dulcie.

‘Dear Miss Courtenay, did you ever know any one that was quite happy? She had many things to make her life bright and pleasant to her, a devoted husband, plenty of money, many friends, youth and beauty.’

‘But you must know if all these things made her happy. Was she very fond of my father?’

‘She looked up to him and admired him,’ faltered Lucy.

‘But she did not love him; he was not her own free choice? I heard that hinted once by a lady I know, and it cut me to the quick. There was some one else my mother liked better before her marriage, was there not?’

‘I am not going to talk about the past, Miss Courtenay. Your dear mother trusted me; she treated me more like a friend than a servant, and anything that I came to know in that way must be sacred.’

‘Yes, I understand. I ought not to have asked you,’ said Dulcie hurriedly.

Mrs. Aspinall’s light talk was true, then. Sir Everard had not been his wife’s favourite suitor. There had been some one else ; some one who had been rejected by her family, to whom her heart had been given.

The stranger startled her presently by a sudden question.

‘Is it true that you and Mr. Blake are to be married, Miss Courtenay?’

‘No. Our engagement has been broken off.’

‘I am glad of that!’

‘Indeed!’ exclaimed Dulcie, with some hauteur. ‘Pray, what fault have you to find with Mr. Blake?’

‘None. He is my benefactor. I owe it to his kindness that I am spending the last weeks of my life in this sweet country place ; that I have a servant to wait upon me, a pretty cottage to live in, and am troubled about nothing. But I do not think it would have been for your happiness to marry him.’

‘That is what my father tells me,’ said Dulcie, with a sigh.

‘Come, Dulcie,’ cried Lady Frances, coming out of a green hollow where she had been on her knees gathering wood anemones for the last half-hour. ‘I have filled my basket, and I hope yours is full too, for it’s time we went home to tea.’

CHAPTER XV.

AN EARNEST MAN.

NEVER had that rude, barn-like structure, Austhorpe Church, looked prettier than on the Sunday next after Easter. All those exotics which had glorified the village fane on Easter Sunday had been restored to the ladies and gentlemen who had lent them. Mrs. Aspinall's arums and azaleas had been carted home to her hothouses. Dulcie's gardenias and white tulips were safe on their shelves under the head gardener's care, or were adorning the rooms their mistress lived in. But the church looked no poorer for the loss of these expensive adornments. Altar and font, pulpit and reading desk, were beautified with borders of freshest moss, in which were embedded clusters of primroses, violets, and wood-anemones. The base of the font was a mass of daffodils, shining golden bright against the dark granite pedestal, purpled by time. To the villagers, who had known and loved these wild woodland

blossoms ever since their eyes first opened to an understanding of nature's beauty, the simple adornments of to-day were sweeter than the grand unknown flowers which had served for the paschal decorations. Flowers lent for the occasion by Mrs. Aspinall and Miss Courtenay, flowers with long Latin names which nobody could remember or pronounce, were not half so good as the modest little blossoms that glorified the woods near home, the woods which were—or seemed to be—public property. There was no sense of obligation or patronage to mar the villagers' delight in the decorations to-day. As they lingered after the service to admire font or altar there was no need to say, 'How kind of Mrs. Aspinall,' or 'How good of Miss Courtenay to contribute such lovely flowers!' They had only to lift up their hearts in silent thankfulness to the Creator who gave His woodland blossoms for all alike, and gave them with a plentifulness which no earthly gardener, labour as he might in the multiplication of slips and seedlings, could imitate.

Lady Frances and Dulcie had worked their

hardest for several hours on Saturday, to achieve even so simple a result.

Lord Blatchmardean's daughter had shrewdly determined that the only way to make Dulcie forget her troubles was to employ her mind and fingers about something, no matter how trivial the task. When the church-work was finished, Lady Frances found she had a pressing necessity for shopping at Highclere, and entreated Dulcie to drive her there directly after luncheon. The drive and the shopping, which was a very small business as to actual expenditure, occupied the whole afternoon, for Frances insisted upon coming round by Blatchmardean Castle on their way home, and running in to see if the dear old Sheik was well, and was resigned to his daughter prolonging her visit at Fairview for a week or two. They were home in time for the afternoon tea, which Sir Everard, whether well or ill, always shared with them. But that friendly meal had lost something of its old pleasantness. Dulcie no longer hung over her father's chair as she ministered to him—no longer sat at his feet, or rested her bright head upon his knee, in child-

like affection. She brought him his cup of tea, and waited on him with respectful tenderness ; but the old caressing ways were wanting, and Sir Everard felt that his daughter and he had drifted wide apart since their return to Fairview. Dulcie sat in her corner by the hearth, joined politely in any conversation that her father or Lady Frances started, but it seemed somehow as if her thoughts were far away from them. Frances noticed that this curious restraint was always upon her in her father's presence. She talked more freely, and seemed happier, when the two girls were alone together.

‘ Yet she used to be so utterly devoted to her father,’ mused Frances. ‘ Morton once complained to me that he was only second in her love. But I suppose she has not forgiven Sir Everard for breaking her engagement. I dare say that would be a hard thing for any girl to forgive ; and these gentle girls have an immense power of resistance. I only wish she would fall in love with Beville, and make a happy end of all this perplexity. But that seems quite too good to happen.’

* * * * *

There was a twitter among the village children, and a thrill of expectation even in older breasts, on the Sunday next after Easter, when the schoolmistress began her voluntary on the harmonium, and when every eye that could so turn was directed to the low stone doorway of the vestry, whence the new curate was presently to emerge.

Hardly any one except Mr. Gomersall, the churchwarden, had seen him, or had any idea what he was like. He might be big or little, gray, or dark, or sandy. Those most interested in his coming, as in an event which stirred the stagnant waters of village life, had made mental pictures of him involuntarily, in the vagabond fancy to which an unemployed mind is disposed. All the young women in the village regretted Mr. Mawk; all the young men ridiculed and affected to despise him, yet were glad he was gone. The middle-aged, steady-going parishioners had suspected him of Papistical leanings, and hoped the new man would be of broader and less modern views; that he would snuffle and drawl less than the Reverend Lionel, and would be able to

preach a good, plain-sailing, practical sermon in twelve or fifteen minutes.

‘ And now the arpeggios of the voluntary swelled with all the power of the loudest stops in the harmonium, and heralded the entrance of the stranger. He had to stoop a little as he came through the arched doorway; and when he lifted his head and looked round him with a swift sweeping glance that surveyed the whole congregation in a flash, his parishioners saw that their pastor was a man worth looking at.

He looked somewhat older than his three-and-thirty years. He was tall, broad-shouldered, erect; with a noble head nobly set on. His eyes were dark gray, his complexion was pale, and there were shadows about his eyes that told of overwork or ill-health. He looked a man born to command; and the congregation felt that he ought to have been a bishop, and was altogether too good for Austhorpe.

‘ He’ll never stay in such a dead-and-alive place as Austhorpe,’ thought Mrs. Gomersall, the churchwarden’s wife, a rosy-faced, buxom matron, glorious in the freshness of her Easter Sunday bonnet.

Mr. Haldimond walked slowly to the reading desk, looked with a pleasant smile at the primroses and violets in their mossy border glanced once more round the church, and in that one glance saw the fair-haired, sad-faced girl in the Fairview pew, with downcast eyes upon her book, and the bright brunette face beside her, and wondered a little who these two girls could be, so different from the rest of the congregation ; not even excepting the honourable Mrs. Aspinall, who confronted the new-comer with the placid impertinence of her double eye-glass. Sir Everard had accompanied his daughter and Lady Frances to church according to his unvarying habit. He was looking ill and careworn, a fact which Mrs. Aspinall had noted without the aid of her eye-glass ; for although it was quite permissible to stare at a clerical nobody like Mr. Haldimond, it was not good form to scrutinize so important a personage as Sir Everard Courtenay with the same direct gaze. At the baronet Mrs. Aspinall stole an occasional glance full of compassion.

‘ No wonder he looks so ill when he has nothing to interest him in life except that chit of a

daughter,' she reflected. 'What a pity he doesn't marry !'

Arthur Haldimond began the service in his low, grave voice, which was distinctly heard in the furthest corners of the old church. He read admirably, as everybody felt before the first part of the service was over. There was no attempt at intoning, no fashionable sing-song, no brisk cantering over the level ground of the liturgy, with a view to leaving more time for the decorative or musical portions thereof. All was sober, serious, reverential. His sermon was brief, for he did not wish to weary those simple, early-dining folks, some of whom had driven half a dozen miles to hear him; but brief as the sermon was, it told his hearers a good deal. It told them that he had put his hand to the plough, meaning to follow it with all his heart and all his strength; that he had come among them prepared to love them and to work for them, as he had loved and worked for a large mass of people in one of the most notorious neighbourhoods of the biggest city in the world.

'It is a place that has borne an evil name

ever since it has been a place at all, it is hardly possible to imagine a wickeder place, out of hell,' he said, 'yet I found plenty of kind hearts, plenty of willing hands, and much instinctive Christianity to help me in my work. I found plenty of parishioners worthy of a parish priest's love, of his confidence and respect, and hardly one who was not entitled to his pity; not one so bad that there was no fair spot in the evil nature; not one so deeply fallen as to be unworthy a good man's effort to pick him up. I have left them, not because I was tired of them, not because I ever for one single moment of my life among them despaired of doing good to them, and finding improvement in them; but because my physical health broke down under the strain of continual and anxious work, and because the doctors warned me that if I went on my mental health must give way too. Forgive me, dear friends, for talking to you about myself, but I want you all to know what manner of parson I am, that I am used to hard work, and love it, and that you never need be afraid to send for me, or to come

to me, or to send your children to me when you think they need more instruction than the ordinary Sunday school course can give them. I love to teach the young, I love to talk with the old. I shall start instruction classes for boys and girls on four evenings of the week, two evenings for the boys, two for the girls. I will only keep them an hour at a time, for I don't want to weary them, or to make the Scriptures unpalatable to them by overdosing. I want to show them what a lovely book their Bible is, and what ineffable wisdom they may find in its pages if they know how to seek. Count upon me, my dear brethren, as one of yourselves, one with you in your joys and your griefs, a friend to whom no trouble of yours can be indifferent, who can never weary in working with you to make our own little bit of this big world better and nearer heaven.'

The preacher's words were so plain and straightforward that the smallest child in the church understood him. His deep, resonant voice, trained in speaking to large congregations, softened as he

addressed this little flock. He looked round upon them with his kindly gray eyes, as if he were already their friend. The grave, handsome face, with its ever-varying expression, the frank, sympathetic manner, won their hearts before his first sermon was ended. This man was a priest whom they could revere and love.

‘Didn’t I tell you he was the right sort, Bess?’ whispered Mr. Gomersall to his wife, as he ducked to grope for his hat under the bench in his comfortable family pew.

Mrs. Aspinall’s barouche stood before the church-yard gate, the well-fed horses tossing their heads and jingling their bits, to the admiration of the villagers; but Mrs. Aspinall was in no hurry to get into her carriage and drive away.

Coming out of the porch, she contrived to waylay Sir Everard and the two girls.

‘My dear Sir Everard, this is a surprise! I had no idea you had returned. How cruel of you, Dulcie, not to let me know! I should have rushed to call upon you directly if I had had the remotest notion. How do you do, Frances? Naughty

girl! You haven't been to see me for an age. But, dear Sir Everard, you are not looking quite so well as I had hoped to see you——'

'My friends are charmingly unanimous in that opinion,' answered Sir Everard, rather wearily. 'I suppose the fact is that blue skies and southern coasts are no remedy for chronic disorders of long standing. A man may take his gout or his rheumatism to the Fijis or the Philippines: but gout is gout and rheumatism is rheumatism to the end of the chapter.'

'Well, I am very glad you have come home,' said Mrs. Aspinall, 'and now you are all coming to lunch with me. Yes, you are,' as Sir Everard began to excuse himself. 'I shall take no denial. Dulcie owes me some recompense for running away just before my little dance. It was a very nice little dance, wasn't it, Frances?'

'It was awfully jolly,' answered Lady Frances.

'I am going to ask the curate man to luncheon,' said Mrs. Aspinall. 'Do you know I never felt more interest in anybody at first sight. Quite an awakening sort of person, don't you know. I

only hope he won't make us feel uncomfortable in our minds, and that he will confine himself to stirring up the poor people, who drink and swear to a shocking extent, I am told, and require to have their consciences worked upon. A remarkably fine-looking man, too—a handsome, intellectual head. I hear that he is a man with a history. He belonged to rich people, and was brought up in the lap of luxury, and began life in the very best society. And when he was three or four-and-twenty his people contrived to lose all their money somehow, and he went into the Church. Oh, here he comes.'

They had been standing on a bit of level green-sward on one side of the porch, Mrs. Aspinall murmuring her confidences to Sir Everard, Dulcie by her father's side, with sad, serious face, and downcast eyes; Frances Grange bright and animated as usual, returning the greetings of her humble acquaintances with smiles and nods.

Mr. Haldimond came slowly along the path with Mr. Gomersall, the churchwarden, by his side. This gave Mrs. Aspinall her opportunity.

‘Mr. Gomersall, pray make me known to our new pastor,’ she said, and the good-tempered farmer stammered out an introduction, presenting the stranger in a confused form of words to Mrs. Aspinall and Sir Everard.

‘I have set my heart upon your taking your luncheon with me,’ said the lady. ‘Sir Everard and his daughter, and Lady Frances Grange are coming. The barouche will hold us all. It is a regular Noah’s ark. Now, please, don’t refuse me. You couldn’t have a better opportunity for getting acquainted with ever so many of your parishioners at once.’

Arthur Haldimond hesitated, stole a glance at Dulcie’s sad, pale face, and accepted the fifth seat in the barouche. It was not Mrs. Aspinall’s overpowering manner, which few people could stand up against, that influenced his acceptance ; but that second look at Dulcie had interested him curiously in the girl’s character. Here surely was the heroine of some painful story. So young, so exquisitely girlish, yet with such deep sorrow written in every line of the innocent face.

Mr. Haldimond and the two girls sat with their backs to the horses. Sir Everard occupied the place of honour by Mrs. Aspinall's side. The curate glanced from Dulcie's face to her father's, and there too he saw the impress of secret care. It was not ill-health alone that had drawn those deep lines about the handsome mouth, that perpendicular wrinkle in the thoughtful brow. Much brooding over painful memories, the rankling misery of one great sorrow, had moulded those features into a look of intense melancholy.

'How charmed you must be at Morton's recovery!' began Mrs. Aspinall, smiling benevolently at Dulcie; but a sharp kick from Lady Frances stopped this gush of sympathy, and turned the current of the lady's speech; 'and how delightful it must have been for you to see the dear romantic Moors, with their mahogany complexions and their white drapery, and the blue, blue southern sea, and the mountains, and the scenery in a general way! I suppose it is absolutely delicious.'

'It is very beautiful,' answered Dulcie, with a mechanical air.

‘But you like home best, perhaps,’ suggested Mr. Haldimond.

‘Yes. I used to be very fond of Austhorpe.’

‘Used to be? Has your mind outgrown this little place?’

‘No—only—since the doctor says papa must not spend another winter in England, I feel that Austhorpe is no longer our home,’ faltered Dulcie. ‘We must reconcile ourselves to being wanderers.’

‘And I suppose next winter you will want to go still further afield. You will be asking Sir Everard to take you to Egypt or India.’

‘I shall be glad to go wherever is best for him.’

‘What has become of Miss Pawker?’ asked Lady Frances.

‘My poor dear Louisa had one of her tire-some headaches,’ said Mrs. Aspinall, ‘but I dare say she will be well enough to take her luncheon with us.’

The fact was that poor dear Louisa had been coaxed to forego the morning service in order that she might make herself generally useful in preparing

an elegant-looking luncheon for the baronet and his daughter, whom Mrs. Aspinall—fully aware of their return, despite her affected surprise at that fact—was determined to take home with her. The consequence of this prudent arrangement was a table elegantly decorated with hothouse flowers, and a tasteful display of those French-looking *hors d'œuvres* in the way of anchovies, *caviare*, olives, tiny pink and white radishes, and other small dainties which set forth a table at a moderate cost, and give colour and variety to the homely roast mutton, or the monotonous boiled chicken.

To all outward seeming the luncheon party at Aspinall Towers was a success. Arthur Haldimond was a man of wide reading and considerable experience. He had travelled a good deal, he had lived in society and out of society, and he was able to talk to anybody and of almost any subject. He contrived to interest Sir Everard; he contrived to interest Dulcie; Lady Frances was charmed with him; Mrs. Aspinall told herself that the curate man was an acquisition; Miss Pawker hung upon his words as if he were inspired.

After luncheon there was a sauntering half-hour in the Italian garden, which looked its best under a cloudless blue sky; and as Mrs. Aspinall and her guests strolled in and out of the narrow serpentine walks, or up and down a broad green alley, Mr. Haldimond contrived to take his place at Dulcie's side.

'I hear that I shall find you a most valuable coadjutor, Miss Courtenay,' he said, when they were far enough from the rest of the party to be confidential. 'Mr. Gomersall tells me that you have done wonders for the school, and that all the poor people adore you.'

'They are very good to think so much of such small kindnesses,' answered Dulcie, with a sigh. 'I have been very happy among them.'

'Have been? Why speak in a past tense? I count upon your help as a pillar of strength. Pray do not disappoint me.'

'My life henceforward will be very uncertain. My father's health may oblige us to leave Austhorpe at any moment.'

'Let us hope not. And even if you have to

desert us sometimes, that is no reason why you should not interest yourself in your native village while you are here. Think what a glorious thing it is to be the dispenser of happiness to those whose joys are so few, to be a consoler among those whose sorrows are so many.'

'We all have our sorrows,' answered Dulcie, with deepest despondency.

'I hope that the griefs which shadow your bright young life are but passing clouds,' said Mr. Haldimond, contemplating the sweet, sad face with infinite compassion. 'Yet you speak as if all joy were gone from you for ever.'

'It has,' answered Dulcie.

'Believe me, no. Youth lives in the present, and deems every sorrow eternal. It is only when we have travelled some distance on the road of life that we know the meaning of hope. Your father's precarious health is the cause of your unhappiness, I apprehend?'

'It is one cause.'

'Can you not find comfort in the thought that your love has lightened his life, that the same filial

love will console and cheer him to the end ; and that when the hour of parting shall come, as it must come to all of us, the severance will be but for a little while ? We say good-bye to each other in a world whose brightest hours and fairest scenes are shadowed by the pain and travail of all nature, to meet where there is neither grief nor care.'

'Are we *all* to meet there ?' asked Dulcie, with a despairing look. 'Will not the sinners be shut out of that happy world ?'

'The unpenitent sinner only. God's great love promises forgiveness to every sinner who honestly and really—not in a mere form of words, but with all his heart and mind and strength, and with every act of atonement in his power—repents his sins.'

'I see. It is not enough for him to be sorry in his heart of hearts. He must atone ; he must bear the brunt of his sin. He must endure the consequences of his evil-doing here if he wants to escape them hereafter.'

'A man who is sorry in his heart of hearts would naturally do his utmost to atone for his sins. There was a striking instance of that in your own neigh-

bourhood last year, in the case of that unhappy creature who gave himself up to justice for a murder committed twenty years ago. Ignorant, brutalized as one might suppose such a man to be, yet even to his blunted mind conscience spoke plainly, and showed him the only way to obtain pardon.'

He looked at Dulcie as he finished speaking, and was startled by the ghastly pallor of her face—the horror in her eyes.

'Forgive me,' he faltered, 'I fear I have spoken of a topic which is in some way painful.'

'Yes,' she answered hurriedly, 'it is a painful subject. The Blakes are our friends.'

'I understand. Pray forgive me. A man coming a stranger into a neighbourhood is sure to make mistakes of this kind. Society is so interlinked and bound together. Let us talk of more cheerful subjects. I want you to tell me all about the schools, Miss Courtenay. Mr. Gomersall has given me some information; but though he seems the best-natured of men, and ready to co-operate with me in every way, he has not the knack of expressing himself very clearly, and I have a great deal yet to learn.'

Dulcie roused herself with an effort, and endeavoured to answer all the curate's questions. The warm earnestness of his manner, his evident delight in the work before him, beguiled her into a brief forgetfulness of her own troubles, and for the next half-hour she talked brightly of her experiences in the schools and among the cottagers of Austhorpe.

'You must make friends with the elder Miss Blake,' she said, 'the lady whom almost everybody calls Aunt Dora. You will find her a more valuable ally than I can possibly be.'

'I am inclined to doubt that. But if you will introduce me to the lady I will do my best to secure her aid.'

'I will leave some one else to do that,' stammered Dulcie; 'I am not likely to see Miss Blake for some time.'

Mr. Haldimond felt that he had again touched upon some painful subject. It seemed to be his evil fate to distress this sweet girl, whose sadness he would so gladly have lessened by any art in his power.

Sir Everard came up to them at this moment, under convoy of Mrs. Aspinall, who had been exert-

ing all her fascinations in a prolonged saunter about the gardens, and had succeeded in making the baronet's life a burden to him.

‘My dear Dulcie, if you and Lady Frances are ready, I shall be glad to take you home?’ he said, strangling an incipient yawn, and Dulcie ran off to summon Frances, who was enlivening the faithful Pawker with her pleasant chat, and making that genteel drudge forget her drudgery and her dependence.

‘You don’t think the walk across the park or through the fields will be too much fatigue for you?’ asked Dulcie, when they were ready to start.

‘Pray let my carriage take you home,’ urged Mrs. Aspinall. ‘It can be ready in a quarter of an hour.’

‘You are very kind,’ said Sir Everard. ‘No, I shall enjoy the walk this lovely afternoon.’

And so they departed, Mrs. Aspinall, Miss Pawker, and Mr. Haldimond walking with them to the little iron gate which divided the gardens from the park. Mr. Haldimond would willingly have gone further with them, but he was bent upon getting a little enlightenment from Mrs. Aspinall as to the

social mysteries amidst which he had found himself blindly stumbling.

Having parted from the baronet, Mrs. Aspinall, who liked masculine society, was all sweetness to the curate.

‘Don’t be in a hurry to leave us,’ she entreated. ‘You have no afternoon service, and you have hours to spare before what Mr. Mawk used to call vespers—much to the indignation of our country bumpkins.’

‘You are very good, but I must go back to spend an hour in the Sunday school. I mean to revive the old-fashioned afternoon service, for Mr. Gomersall tells me it was the most popular service of the day, as it suited farmers and people who live a long way off.’

‘Pray don’t make a slave of yourself,’ expostulated Mrs. Aspinall, in a tone of friendly interest. ‘Austhorpe people are horridly ungrateful. They will only revile you for your pains.’

“‘When you do well and suffer for it,’” quoted Mr. Haldimond. ‘I must do my utmost according to my lights, and abide the issue. But I fear I have been doing very badly to-day. I had set

my heart upon winning the friendship of that sweet-looking girl, Miss Courtenay, and on two occasions I was idiot enough to say something that caused her extreme distress. Yet I had no idea why it should be so. The first time was when I spoke of the man who was tried at Highclere for a murder, and condemned upon his own confession. The second was when I asked her to introduce me to a certain Miss Dora Blake.'

'You poor foolish man, you could hardly have done worse,' exclaimed Mrs. Aspinall. 'This comes of not getting yourself coached by some one who knows the society you are coming into. Mr. Mawk ought really to have given you the *carte du pays*. However, in Miss Courtenay's case it was almost impossible to avoid coming to grief, for even I myself did not know the real state of affairs till Lady Frances Grange enlightened me, just before luncheon.'

'Pray explain.'

'Well, in the first place you ought not to have spoken of the murder, because the man who was murdered was Walter Blake, of Tangley, to whose only son, Morton, Miss Courtenay was engaged.'

‘Oh,’ said Mr. Haldimond, ‘she is engaged, is she?’

‘Don’t interrupt, troublesome man,’ cried Mrs. Aspinall, with her kittenish air. ‘If you were listening properly you would have heard that I said was engaged, not is engaged. To gratify some caprice of Sir Everard’s the engagement has been broken off, and Dulcie is absolutely miserable. And six months ago she was the brightest, happiest little creature.’

‘But surely her father must have had some substantial reason for breaking the engagement,’ said Mr. Haldimond. ‘He would not sacrifice his daughter’s happiness to a whim.’

‘What reason could he have? Morton is altogether charming; he has horrid radical ideas, but still is excessively nice. He has a fine estate, is entirely his own master, intellectual, ambitious, good-looking, high-principled. What more could the most exacting father demand in his daughter’s suitor?’

‘Yet there must be a hitch somewhere,’ said the curate thoughtfully. ‘No father would will -

ingly make his daughter unhappy; and I fear that Miss Courtenay is really unhappy. Even in her conversation with me, a stranger, she unconsciously revealed the depth of her misery. And she is so girlish—childish almost in her freshness and simplicity. I feel intensely sorry for her.'

'Sweetest child, my heart positively bleeds for her,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a sigh, which was almost extinguished in a yawn. 'Do come back to the house and take some tea.'

'Thanks, you are too good, but I must go to my school;' and the curate shook hands with the two ladies, and went out at the little gate and across the grass with the steady, swinging pace of a man who has walked half over England and done no small portion of the Continent at a systematic five miles an hour.

CHAPTER XVI.

‘I DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOU, MORTON.’

ENCOURAGED by Sir Everard's kindness, and stimulated by hints from Lady Frances, Lord Beville appeared at Fairview not once, but many times, before his sister's long visit came to an end. Dulcie received him graciously, as her friend's brother, but the vainest of men could hardly have imagined himself peculiarly favoured or chosen out from the herd, so evident was the girl's unconsciousness of his admiration, and calm indifference to himself. She only recognised his existence as Fanny's brother. She lived in a world apart from his, taking no interest in his occupations and amusements. How could two beings whose minds were so differently formed ever be brought into tender or sympathetic relations? Beville might adore Dulcie with a reverent love, looking up to her as his bright particular star, but how was Dulcie to let herself down to the level of a young man whose billiard playing was his most

intellectual accomplishment, and who from October to April spent five days out of the seven following somebody's hounds, and sighed for nothing higher or more noble in life than to have a pack of his own to follow ?

‘If I could but afford to hunt the country,’ he said to his sister with a sigh. ‘I know they'd all like me for their M. F. H.’

‘Of course they would, dear,’ answered Frances ; ‘and if—if you could marry a nice girl with plenty of ready money you could take the hounds next year. I know Sir James Prior is tired of them.’

‘There is only one girl I would give sixpence for, and she will never have me,’ sighed Beville.

His sister began to think he was right. Dulcie, who had so loved Morton, never could or would stoop to the lower level of an unintellectual lover. Beville's good looks, Beville's good heart, went for nothing with a girl of highly cultivated mind, to whom intellectual society was a necessity.

Frances stayed at Fairview nearly five weeks, Sir Everard seeming always loth to let her go, and Dulcie clinging to her with ever-increasing affection.

She had done much to win the girl to temporary forgetfulness of her grief, but the grief remained all the same, an abiding fact, which no arts of Frances Grange could cure. Sorrow had set a seal upon the fair young face, and had given a new character to Dulcie's girlish beauty. To the eye of Arthur Haldimond that pale and pensive countenance seemed the face of a martyr. He could picture just such a face, heavenly calm, amidst the carnage of a Roman amphitheatre. The day came when Frances protested that she positively must go home. The dear, patient Sheik had been shamefully neglected, and his daughter must not stay away from him another hour.

'But if you suppose you are going to get rid of me altogether, Dulcie, you are vastly mistaken,' protested Frances as she kissed her friend. 'I shall ride over to see you three or four times a week, and I insist upon your driving those underworked porpoises of yours to Blatchmardean on the off days. We are miserable paupers, but I can give you a cup of tea, and if Sir Everard will come with you sometimes I shall be—ever so proud.'

'You know how little chance there is of that,

Fanny. He seldom leaves his study now except for a lonely walk in the shrubberies.'

'I know he mopes horribly, and that is the very way to make him a confirmed invalid. You ought to rouse him out of his solitary habits, Dulcie. He is so clever—so superior to any one I know. It is a shame that he should lead such a hermit's life. Certainly there is hardly any one within twenty miles of Austhorpe fit to associate with him, unless it be this Mr. Haldimond, who seems tremendously clever.'

'Yes, he is clever and earnest and good. I wish my dear father would make a friend of him.'

'Well, perhaps he will in time, if he finds that you like him and are interested in his work. And now good-bye, darling ; but remember it isn't because I am returning to the path of filial duty that you and I are to be parted. My life henceforward will oscillate between Blatchmardean and Fairview.'

The many-coloured month of May was drawing to a close by this time. Hawthorns whitened the woods and hedges, and filled the lanes with perfume. All the gardens were golden with berberis and wall-flowers, and all the woodland glades were blue with

wild hyacinths. The cuckoo had become a nuisance, and the skylark monotonously melodious, while the too-industrious woodpecker creaked and tapped and screwed to a maddening extent in every hollow beech tree. The little rustic world of Austhorpe was completely beautiful in its glory of spring blossoms, shining under sunny skies, and gently ruffled by softest west winds; but perhaps only the village children were any the happier for all this beauty, or enjoyed themselves at this free banquet-table Nature had spread for them. For the grown-up people there was ever some cloud of care that shadowed the vivid colour of the flowers and darkened the glory of the sun.

Morton had slowly regained health and strength in body and mind. It had been a difficult and laborious recovery, attended by intense depression of spirits. He came back to life reluctantly, like a man who felt that death would have been a happy escape from a world of trouble. But youth and nature were stronger than the patient's will. The wild delusions of a fevered brain gradually departed, and left the dreamer face to face with stern reality. Natural sleep refreshed the worn-out frame; the prolonged

idleness of convalescence tranquilized the overwrought mind, and before the rose-flushed hawthorn bloom had faded Morton was able to pursue the usual tenor of his industrious life.

During that weary period of recovery, Lizzie Hardman had shared with Aunt Dora in all the duties of nurse, attendant, and companion. Upon Lizzie, indeed, had fallen the greater part of the work, for Miss Blake's own health had suffered from her anxiety about her nephew, and she was herself in need of care and rest. But Lizzie was never tired. She read to Morton for hours, no matter how dry or heavy the book he wished to have read to him. She wrote at his dictation, and entered heart and soul into all his studies and plans for the advantage of his fellow-men; was able to discuss the most abstruse questions of political economy, and flung herself, with all a woman's headlong enthusiasm, into every philanthropic scheme. Her companionship, which seemed more like the *camaraderie* of a young brother student than the society of a girl, did much to lighten the tedium of that slow convalescence. Then she was so staunch and faithful,

and although she never of her own accord talked to Morton about Dulcie, she always frankly and fully answered any questions which he chose to ask her.

Never, since that afternoon when death seemed so near, and recovery so unlikely, had Morton expressed a wish to see Dulcie ; but on more than one occasion had he questioned Lizzie about her.

'Sir Everard and his daughter are still at Austhorpe, I suppose?' he said one morning, when Lizzie had laid down her book in order to give him the cup of strong beef tea which was to be administered with rigid precision at eleven o'clock every morning, whether the patient liked it or not.

'Yes, they are still here.'

'Do you ever see her?'

'I saw her yesterday coming away from the afternoon service. The new curate has instituted a daily service at half-past four, you know. He was going to make it five, I believe, but people told him it would interfere with five o'clock tea, and would never be popular with the ladies, who form the chief part of a week-day congregation.'

'I see. And now they go to prayers first, and

to tea and scandal afterwards. How was Dulcie looking when you saw her ?’

‘ Pale, and grave, and quiet.’

‘ Not ill, I hope ?’

‘ No, I do not know that she was looking ill ; but she looks older and graver than she used to look in happier days.’

‘ Did you think she looked unhappy ?’

‘ Yes, Morton. I will not tell you anything less than the truth. I am sure she is unhappy.’

‘ Poor child, I am very sorry for her. We have each our burden to bear. What must be must be.’

Morton told his aunt one day when they were alone together that his engagement had been cancelled at Sir Everard’s desire.

‘ The man must be mad,’ exclaimed Dora Blake impetuously.

‘ Can you, who have known him so long, who knew him in my father’s life-time, imagine no reason he might have for desiring to break the engagement ? ’ asked Morton, watchful of his aunt’s countenance.

She remained silent for some moments, with a look of trouble in her expressive face.

'What reason could there be—what reason dating from the past—which did not exist when the engagement was made?'

'He may have yielded weakly to his daughter's wish for a time, till conscience awoke all at once and urged him to forbid our marriage.'

'Conscience?'

'Yes, Aunt Dora, conscience! What but a conscientious scruple of some kind, based on a guilty secret, could constrain him to break his daughter's heart and mine? But I am thankful to him for having taken the initiative. If he had not broken the engagement I must have done it. I could not have gone on suffering as I suffered, wilfully blind to a fact which forced itself upon me at every turn. Sooner or later my scruples must have grown stronger than my love, and I must, by my own act, have separated myself from Dulcie. How much harder for me to do so than for her father to part us! I ought to be grateful to him. It is the one honourable act of his life.'

'I do not understand you, Morton,' faltered Miss Blake.

'Yes, you do, aunt. Your pale cheek, your

troubled eye, tell me that you do understand my meaning. You have the light of the past to guide you. You know much that is hidden from me. You must—you do—know that Sir Everard Courtenay murdered my father.’

‘Morton! how can you allege anything so horrible when that man’s confession cleared Sir Everard for ever?’

‘Cleared him. Then in your mind he was the suspected murderer until another confessed the crime.’

‘I will not say one word, Morton.’

‘Yes, you suspected—you knew—and yet you allowed me to engage myself to Dulcie!’

‘What power had I to prevent that engagement? You had offered yourself to her before I knew that you had given her your heart. I had cherished other ideas, other hopes. The whole business came upon me as a surprise. As to my suspicions of Sir Everard, they were vague—shapeless—a mere undefinable terror to me, which I hardly dared own to myself. Vargas’s confession and conviction set those horrible fears at rest for ever.’

‘To my mind Vargas’s confession opened a gulf,

down which I hardly dared to look while Dulcie was my affianced wife. Now——'

'You will not try to bring disgrace upon the father of the girl you love—for you do love her still, do you not, Morton?'

'With all my heart.'

'Even if you had ceased to love her, if she were nothing to you but that which she is to all who know her, a lovely and amiable girl, it would be a horrible thing to inflict disgrace upon her by bringing a hideous accusation against her father. What evidence have you to sustain this frightful suspicion? None, or none of a tangible nature.'

'God only knows what I shall do,' said Morton. 'I speak to you as I would speak to no one else, Aunt Dora; for I know that you share my suspicions.'

'Only because I knew that Everard Courtenay had been deeply wronged. You force me to speak of these things, Morton, to recall a past which were better buried and forgotten. You know how fondly I loved your father; yet I cannot deny that he dealt falsely and treacherously with Sir Everard Courtenay. Be wise then, Morton. Leave this sad story of the

past in the shadow where it lies, and leave the punishment of your father’s murderer to the Great Avenger.’

Morton was silent. This charge of falsehood and treachery brought against his father by one who had so deeply loved him was a heavy blow to the son. He knew Dora Blake’s utter truthfulness, her strong sense of justice ; and he knew that she would not bring such a charge as this against an idolized brother without undeniable evidence. Yet he ought, perhaps to have been prepared for such a revelation. Could he, at any moment, have supposed that groundless, unprovoked jealousy had made Sir Everard turn assassin ? Only the belief in his friend’s treachery, in a deep, irreparable wrong, could have goaded a sane man to such a crime. How far Sir Everard’s belief in Walter Blake’s guilt might have been justified by facts Morton had never asked himself until to-day. One image had ever been present to his mind, excluding every other consideration—the image of his murdered father, cut off in the prime and heyday of life.

No more was said either by aunt or nephew ; but the recollection of that conversation sank deep in the

young man's mind, and gave a new colour to his thoughts.

Had it not been for Lizzie Hardman he would in all likelihood have relapsed into that state of apathy and depression which had been the beginning of his dangerous illness. The mind, brooding perpetually upon one gloomy theme, would have again given way. But Lizzie would not allow him to be idle. She stimulated him in the pursuit of studies which were congenial to his mind and heart. She so warmly adopted his favourite ideas, so interested herself in his dearest schemes, that she infused new vigour and life into the old thoughts, and made the most Utopian plans appear practicable and full of hope. She urged him to publish a pamphlet upon compulsory education, a subject which he had taken deeply to heart, and upon which he had original and peculiar views. She offered to be his amanuensis, as he was not yet strong enough to bear the fatigue of much penmanship. At first he was unwilling to inflict such a task upon her, and doubted his own ability to give free expression to his thoughts in dictation; but Lizzie's interest in his work seemed

so unaffected, her willingness to help was so sincere, that, were it only to gratify her, he gave way, and the pamphlet was begun. First crude ideas were roughly jotted down, then the theme rounded itself in the thinker's mind and he began with a sentence worthy of Junius. Once begun, the work was easy. Morton lay on his sofa looking out at the lilacs and laburnums, the guelder roses and pink may, and dictating his thoughts in measured syllables; while Lizzie, who was a neat and rapid penman, sat at her little table by one of the windows, far enough from the thinker for him to be almost unconscious of her presence.

‘Do you know, Lizzie, you are more like a sister to me than either of my sisters,’ Morton said one day.

Lizzie was slow to acknowledge this compliment.

‘I am glad to be useful to you in any way,’ she said at last, ‘for I owe you and yours so much that it is a happiness to be able to pay the veriest trifle—on account.’

‘Don’t be so horribly commercial, Lizzie. You

owe us nothing, and need pay us nothing. I know you are auntie's right hand, and that she could not get on anyhow without you. But it was not your usefulness I was thinking about when I said you were like a sister to me. An amanuensis or a reader can be got any day at so much an hour ; so I am not going to be intensely grateful on that score. What I feel is your companionship, your power of sharing and understanding all my ideas, your perfect sympathy.'

They were sitting in the twilight after dinner in the drawing-room. The two sisters were on the lawn playing a *tête-à-tête* game of croquet. Aunt Dora was reading by a distant window. Lizzie bent over her work, her face quite hidden in the dim light.

'What busy fingers!' exclaimed Morton. 'I don't think you know what idleness means.'

'I hope before we are many months older you will be busy at Blackford electioneering,' said Lizzie, with a laugh.

'What, you really think I ought to stand for Blackford at the first vacancy?'

'I am sure of it. You are the very man the Blackford people want to represent them. My cousin tells me that old Mr. Tilney, the Liberal member, talks of giving up his seat. He suffers from chronic asthma, poor man, and is ordered abroad every winter, so he might just as well resign his post to a man who can be useful to the town.'

'Well, if Mr. Tilney vacate his seat I will try my luck, Lizzie. I would do as much as that out of gratitude for all your goodness to me during the last six weeks.'

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN CALLED TINKER.

THE time which Jane Barnard had appointed in her own mind for her return to America had come and gone, and she was still patiently drudging on in Mrs. Jebb's service, and was not one step nearer success. She wrote to her husband by every mail, and she wrote much more hopefully than she felt, lest he should lose patience and insist upon her immediate return.

Her residence under Mr. Jebb's roof had been so far barren of all result. The surgeon talked a great deal, and talked as freely before the American nurse as if she had been deaf and dumb; but there was no more substance in his talk by the domestic hearth than there had been in the coffee-room at the Peacock. He had the air of knowing a great deal—of being able to unfold a terrible tale—were he inclined to do so, but his insinuations never came

to a point. All his suggestions of a secret ended in nods, and shrugs, and lifted eyebrows, and smothered sighs, which, as Mr. Tomplin said, might mean anything or nothing. Mrs. Barnard was honestly fond of children, and she had attached herself to the youthful Jebbs, although they were by no means perfect specimens of juvenile humanity ; yet as the weeks and months dragged on she began to weary of her exile, her service in a stranger's house, and began to yearn for the sight of her own children.

She had made up her mind to leave England before the end of May. She would obtain leave to see the prisoner at Portland before starting, knowing but too well that this farewell interview would be verily the last, and that she would never see the poor old erring father again ; and then she would go to her happy home on the other side of the wide sea, and confess that she had failed in her mission. If in the days to come the story of her father's crime and punishment should be made a reproach against her children, they must bear their burden as she had borne hers. Every life must have its

shadow as well as its sunshine; and if this were a darker shadow than falls upon most lives, it must be endured with patience and resignation. Jane Barnard told herself that she could do no more.

She had fixed the day of her departure, and had given due notice to Mrs. Jebb, who piteously bewailed the loss of one of the few good servants she had ever been blessed with; and now there remained but a week of her bondage in a strange land, and she was full of the thought of the husband and children at home, and the delight of seeing those dear faces after half a year's absence.

Domestic life at the Homestead had been unusually smooth during Jane Barnard's period of service. Polly, the cook, was a good-natured, flighty, gossiping girl, who did all her work in tremendous spurts, and idled prodigiously between whiles. With this Polly Mrs. Jebb carried on a continual struggle, which in a woman of sterner temper would have been actual warfare; but which with mild Mrs. Jebb never rose above plaintive remonstrance and tearful complaint. But with Jane Barnard Mrs. Jebb never complained, and Polly, the cook, declared

that Jane managed her mistress. Jane was energetic and business-like, met all the petty difficulties of a narrow domestic sphere with calm resolution and perfect temper, and brightened the surgeon's home by her hopeful spirit and never-ceasing industry.

'It's very hard that when I get a servant who suits me so well she should go to America,' sighed Mrs. Jebb. 'And now I have to look about me again, and Austhorpe servants are so bad.'

Mrs. Jebb's looking about consisted generally in making her wants known to the butcher and the baker, and then waiting till Providence should send her some kind of servant, bad, good, or indifferent, as the case might be.

But if Mrs. Jebb had reason to complain of the shortcomings of female servants, Shafto, for his part, declared that cooks and housemaids were angelic beings as compared with that pest of society, the outdoor man. He was perpetually at war with the man-of-all-work who looked after his horses, cleaned carriage and harness, occasionally drove a gig, and employed his leisure hours in working in the scrubby, untidy garden, given over for the most part to goose-

berry bushes and cabbage stalks, which were not fair to look upon, but which were of some use in producing a nondescript leafy vegetable known as 'greens.' This office in Mr. Jebb's household had been filled and refilled many times during the surgeon's career, and was apt to be vacated suddenly with storm and tempest, the groom turning out either a hopeless drunkard or an incorrigible thief, or perchance a feeble creature who had never touched a horse till he took the situation, and for whom Mr. Jebb's two well-worked screws manifested their contempt by nearly kicking him to death on his first endeavour to valet them.

Of late, however, Mr. Jebb, like his wife, had been better off in this respect. The man who had the care of his stables knew his work and did it well. True that he was generally in a maudlin state every night, that his appearance was gaunt, and his private wardrobe better adapted for a scarecrow than for a human being. He could shuffle on Mr. Jebb's livery coat and thrust his thin legs into a pair of ancient top-boots when required so to disguise himself, and in this gear, handed on from groom to

groom, he had something of the style and bearing of a well-trained servant.

‘God knows where the man came from, or what he has been doing all his life,’ said Shafto, ‘but at some time or other he must have been in a gentleman’s service. He has the stamp upon him even in his decay.’

No one knew where Tinker came from. Tinker was the name by which he insisted upon being known, yet every one had a rooted idea that it was a feigned name. Charged with want of candour on this subject he argued the question in this wise:—

‘Nineteen year ago there were a hoss called Tinker won the Ledger, wasn’t there?’ he demanded; and the person addressed being usually more or less ignorant was apt to reply in the affirmative.

‘Very well, then,’ answered the groom. ‘If Tinker was a good enough name for him it ought to be good enough for me, didn’t it?’ whereupon no one felt able to gainsay him, and as Tinker he was generally accepted and received in that circle of society in which he was privileged to move.

He was a sententious person, and had strong

opinions upon some subjects, but of his own antecedents he said never a word. He had turned up in the stable-yard of the Peacock one market day, and had there addressed himself to Mr. Jebb, as that gentleman was watching the harnessing of his horse by somewhat unskilled hands. He had heard somehow that Mr. Jebb wanted a groom, and offered himself for the place. As to character, well, no, he couldn't give any; he knew no one in those parts.

Mr. Jebb hesitated. Experience had taught him that a character with a servant is very much like a warranty with a horse, inasmuch as both are worthless. He told the man to call upon him that evening, and his last groom having been violently ejected the night before, leaving the stable-work on the surgeon's hands, he took the waif into his service on trial.

'If you don't suit you must go at the end of the week,' he said, to which the man calling himself Tinker agreed.

Tinker did suit, and Tinker stayed. He was a man of curiously exclusive habits, spending all his leisure in a wretched shed next the stable, which Mr.

Jebb called his harness-room. Here, in company with boots and blacking brushes, a colony of empty bottles, and the well-worn harness, Tinker devoted his evenings to the perusal of any old newspaper which he could get hold of. He was not fond of society. When he drank he drank in the retirement of his own den, and needed not the charm of good company to give flavour to his liquor. The Three Sugar-Loaves knew him not. Perhaps he shrank from exhibiting his tattered raiment in such a prosperous tavern. Perhaps he was by nature and inclination a recluse.

All went smoothly in the stable. The horses were better groomed than they had been since Mr. Jebb had owned them; the harness was brighter, the general turn-out more creditable; and the surgeon congratulated himself upon his own discrimination in having picked up such a servant, and upon his own courage in having taken him without a character, when within a few days of Mrs. Barnard's intended departure Mr. Jebb made a discovery which wrought an appalling alteration in his feelings towards Tinker.

The wine-cellar at the Homestead was not a stately vault, nor was it stocked with a valuable collection of choice wines; but poor and dilapidated as the cellar was, and small though its contents were, Mr. Jebb kept the key of it himself, and guarded its treasures with peculiar care. He had a good supply of Bass, and a bin of Highclere ale, bottled and laid down by himself. He had a dozen or so of port in case of illness, three or four dozen of sherry to give his friends; and at the end of the cellar, in a narrow arched recess deep in the old brick-work, he had a snug little stock of spirits, including a dozen of a very particular Scotch whisky which had been sent him as a present from a friend at Inverness. To make the security of this corner still more secure Mr. Jebb had built up a barrier of beer in front of the shelf where the whisky reposed, so that in the event of a burglarious intruder forcing his way into the stable the famous Scotch whisky would escape that intruder's attention. With a self-denial that approached the heroic, Mr. Jebb had resolved to let the mellowing influence of time soften and improve the spirit before he converted it into toddy.

'We'll keep it a year or two, my love,' he told his wife. 'I am not a whisky drinker, and I can afford to wait. It is a nice thing to know one has such good stuff in one's cellar.'

One rainy afternoon in this last week of May, Mr. Jebb returned from his daily round amongst outlying homesteads and distant villages, soaked to the skin, and with all the symptoms of influenza. He ordered a fire in the breakfast-room, and sat in his roomy armchair shivering, though wood and coals blazed merrily in the big basket-shaped grate.

'I'm chilled to the bone,' he explained, 'and I don't think anything but a jorum of hot spirits and water will warm me. Do you know, Emmie, my love, I've a deuced good mind to try that whisky.'

'Why shouldn't you, dear?' asked dutiful Mrs. Jebb. 'I'm sure I would if I were you. Nobody has a better right to it. I'll ring for the kettle while you go to the cellar.'

Mr. Jebb hesitated, and pulled his whiskers thoughtfully.

'I had made up my mind to keep that whisky two years; and I haven't had it more than

six months. It seems weak to break into the dozen.'

'Not when it is a question of health, Shafto. I'm sure a good tumbler of strong toddy will cure that shivering of yours.'

'It isn't the shivering only,' said Jebb. 'I feel such a depression—I should be grateful to anybody who would blow my brains out.'

'Oh, pray get the whisky, Shafto. It's dreadful to hear the father of a family talk so wildly,' cried Mrs. Jebb, alarmed.

Her husband only wanted to be persuaded. He sighed, snuffled a little, felt in his pocket for his key, and went to the cellar.

There were no underground cellars at the Homestead. The repository in which Shafto kept his wine was on a level with the dining-room, kitchens, dairy, apple-room, and various offices. This part of the old farmhouse was roomy enough for a retinue of servants.

The cellar was low and narrow and dark, a kind of arched passage under a back staircase. Shafto had provided himself with a lighted candle

as he came along, and he now penetrated the sacred vault.

There was the neat wall of beer bottles, with their necks pointing outwards, a fortification in front of the whisky. It was rather troublesome to have to disturb them before the proper time, but Mr. Jebb felt that nothing less than toddy would subjugate an incipient influenza. He moved three or four of the bottles gingerly, and peered into the dusky recess behind.

‘A blank, my lord.’

Where the red seals of the whisky bottles should have gladdened his eye, he beheld only darkness. He put in his hand, and felt only emptiness. Then with hands that were tremulous with horror, he rapidly cleared out the range of beer bottles, and made himself master of the ruin behind.

Seven of the twelve whisky bottles were gone. And yet no burglar had invaded the house, nor had the key of the cellar been out of Mr. Jebb’s possession. He stood with the candlestick in his hand, staring into empty space, utterly at a loss

to account for the disappearance of his treasure.

Had Mrs. Jebb a duplicate key to the cellar, and a secret craving for ardent spirits? No, he could not so foully wrong the partner of his struggles as to suspect her of such infamy. Was this American nurse a traitor? Your confidential servant, a superior person, is often a smooth deceiver.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON :
J. AND W. RIDER, PRINTERS,
BARTHOLOMEW CLOSE.



